



REMY CAVILICH

BY  
ANY

*Other*  
**NAME**

A TIME-TRAVELING ROMANCE

By Any Other Name  
*A Time-Traveling Romance*

Remy Cavilich

By Any Other Name: A Time Traveling Romance

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*This is a story about two people  
who escape from their own realities in different ways.*

*They may be morally gray  
their thoughts may seem selfish at times  
but only because we spend more time pleasing others  
than we do pleasing ourselves.*



\* \* \*

*Remember to love yourself,  
give yourself happiness,  
live life for today;  
do not feel ashamed for the choices you make—  
unlike the characters in this book, we only live but one life.*

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# **Tropes And Triggers You Will Find In This Book**

- DubCon (TW:R@pe)
- Dominant Royal Alpha Male
- Time Travel
- Don't Alter the Timeline
- Making the Ultimate Sacrifice
- Forced Proximity
- Destined to be Together
- Abduction
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- Reverse Harem (all 1-on-1 action)

# Chapter 1

In a cramped, overpriced studio apartment on the 7th floor of the Skyline Apartments, a single candle sat on a disorganized desk against the only window in the room. It chased the shadows back a few feet from the disheveled woman whose head laid dangerously close to the open flame. The papers scattered everywhere were a testament to her very haphazard approach to life in general. From somewhere in the darkness, a Bluetooth speaker spewed the words of the documentary on her computer screen, dimmed to near darkness, the bright images still dancing across the screen for an audience of one who'd passed out long ago.

Tendrils of the woman's hair had covered every loose sheet of paper on her desk, attempting to absorb information while she slept. The handwriting flowed across the pages like a calm river, each letter an extension of herself. A single pen hung limply in her grip as she slept, still unable to let go of the vessel that brought her words to life, even in her unconscious state.

A fat black cat sat on the window ledge to the fire escape, having come up from the downstairs apartment to help her finish her meal of ramen and Cheetos. The furry feline was her only friend in this lonely existence, and finding her window cracked, he slipped a paw underneath, lifting the window with a practiced move to let himself in from the rain outside. Shaking his fur out, he scattered droplets of water all over everything, waking the woman from her slumber with a start.

"Ugh, Mister Toodles, what the *hell*? Was that necessary?"

She shooed the cat off her desk with a rolled-up paper, his tail held high as he relocated defiantly to her bed, sharing his moist fur with the thick down comforter she bought to help keep the heating costs down. Running a hand through her hair, she shook out her wavy mahogany mane, wishing it would decide to either curl or lay flat.

Her eyes followed the demanding cat as he licked himself with



absolutely no shame at the end of her bed, his foot pointed in the air like a graceful ballet dancer as he smoothed his fur. She wished she could get her leg that high in the air. Sure, she could dance, but she was no professional, and ballet dancers always looked so graceful. They moved like a swimming swan, almost as if their feet never actually touched the ground.

She envied them their form; their bodies morphed into elegant lines as they pointed and curved and drew a picture with their toes, their dance the ultimate medium for their creativity. She'd always been more of a tomboy, preferring to lose herself in the colorful, captivating world of great authors. Instead of ballet, she'd discovered a particular affinity for down-and-dirty sports, like baseball and football.

As a girl, she didn't get many opportunities to play these sports, but their sister sports, softball and track, were adequate replacements for her true passions. She'd made a few friends, had a few sleepovers, like a normal girl.

When she'd been in high school, she'd always enjoyed karaoke nights with her friends, but when everyone went off to college, scattering among five different states, karaoke nights became a thing of the past, and so did having meaningful relationships with a circle of peers. She'd quickly found she didn't fit in here, in this new town where nobody knew her name. She'd abandoned the idea of inventing a whole new persona, feeling silly and childish at the thought of not being herself.

There was nothing wrong with who she was. *Right?*

Her mind focused on the messy desk, sighing as she took note of the bleeding ink on some pages. Her gaze traveled to the cat, who had moved to sniff her trash for remnants of her beef ramen bowl.

"Would you mind your own business, you greedy old cat?" She scolded as she lifted him from the floor to set him on the counter. As her hand snaked under the counter to retrieve a hidden treat, the fat cat in question began to wiggle back and forth in excitement, stalking her every move like she was the prey.

When the treat cleared the counter, he snatched it from her hand and made a mad dash for the open window, scattering papers as he

scrambled to get his fat behind out of the small gap he'd left himself. Almost expecting a cartoonish 'pop' when the window released its' hold on him, she was disappointed when it never came. The wind outside threw her curtains back in a sudden gust, the blow-back of the wind snuffing out the steady glow of the candle she'd been using for light.

The fire died out, casting the whole room into darkness as she cursed, fumbling around on the desk for a lighter. Her fingers moved steadily along the tabletop as she tried to locate the tool she'd used only hours ago. She failed to notice her dangerous proximity to the hot wax in the jar as she stuck her fingers blindly into the molten liquid.

She cried out, biting back a scream as she realized she'd probably given herself a second-degree burn with that stupid move. She rushed to the bathroom, her hands skating across the smooth surface of the mirror as she curled her fingers around the edge of the medicine cabinet, yanking it open with enough force to knock some pill bottles from the shelves inside. They fell to the sink basin with a loud rattle, but she paid them no mind, searching for the burn cream she was *positive* she had in here somewhere.

She muttered under her breath as she searched for the similar, half-empty tube in the contents of the sink, her frustration growing with the pain.

"Where the *fuck* is that stupid tube? Stupid electricity company, no light in this dumb place, no room to move around, no room to breathe..."

She shouted triumphantly as her hands closed around the small tube, recognizing its' odd shape from the piece of tape she'd stuck against it to plug a hole. She'd shoved it in the same caddy her razor had been in, and the sharp blade had punctured the thin plastic case of the expensive jelly. She couldn't afford to lose almost ten dollars worth of the valuable cream, so she'd applied the patch.

Outside the window in her living room, the storm raged on, thunder sending sound waves through the darkness of the night, making the whole building shake with its intensity. Having washed the wax from her hand, applied burn creme, and bandaging, she moved

back out to the single room, her movements sluggish and slow. The adrenaline faded from the moment of extreme pain, and the woman flopped back against her bed as she groaned, the stress heavy on her shoulders.

With no electricity due to a bank error and an unpaid bill, she found herself stuck in this darkness for the night. As if confirming her hopelessness in this situation, the cracking sound of a thunderclap, followed by a bright flash of lightning, punctuated the silence of the night, plunging the whole block into darkness. Several people leaned out their windows, shouting at the sky as if it could hear their protests.

As if it cared.

She'd cried many of her own frustrations and hopeless feelings out at that same sky, and nothing ever answered her back. She was left holding her feelings of inadequacy and helplessness; no reply from the gods people seemed to think were listening.

If they were listening, they certainly gave not a single *fuck* about *her*.

She covered her eyes with her healthy arm, shielding them from the bright lightning outside before briefly wondering if she could still study and work by the light of nature's dangerous force. She shook her head, realizing she was fast losing control of her own life. If she didn't finish this final, she wouldn't graduate, and graduates almost always placed in an excellent job in her field of study. She just had to finish out this semester, and she'd be free and clear, on her way up from the poverty that had choked her for most of her life.

She'd be able to get herself and her mother a nice place in a safe part of town, so she wouldn't have to stay in the state-run facility for people who needed some assistance. Her mother was self-sufficient, but she had a medical history a mile long, and it did her mind some good to know someone was always nearby for her mother. It wasn't like having her at home, but it was all she could do for the time being.

Nothing had been the same after Daddy died. His death had broken them apart, scattered all their plans like rice at a wedding or flowers at a funeral. Without his stern voice and his rational words

to guide them, the household had fallen into disarray, her grades slipping at the University as she struggled to deal with the death of her father alone. Her brother had gone to Europe to 'free his emotions in the untamed wild of another country', claiming he needed 'space', never to come back.

She knew he never would, somewhere in the back of her mind, but she wasn't ready to admit that yet. Admitting that would be like announcing her defeat, admitting she'd wasted her time worrying for her brother, hiding his blatant excuses from herself. She suspected her mother had come to terms with it already, thus why she never asked for details when she spoke to him.

The long, slender hands on the analog clock crept along at a snail's pace, the steady ticking that echoed in the quiet of the apartment the only indication that time marched on around her. She groaned, rolling over on her stomach as she struggled to find a comfortable position. She knew her computer's battery would die soon, but the quiet words of the narrator in the video she'd been watching before still echoed in the darkness that surrounded her. Sighing heavily, she closed her eyes as she stretched out, listening to the droning voice of the narrator as it lulled her into a restless sleep.



\* \* \*

The thunder rolled outside her window, but the woman was oblivious to it, sleep having claimed her long ago. The worst of the storm raged around her dark apartment, the wind carrying nature's debris through the streets as it blew past houses, cars, and apartments alike. The leaves stopped for a moment to swirl around a set of legs just outside the woman's building, dancing across the tops of the figure's bare feet. Their body slowly came into view, the tall, striking figure of a man forming in the swirling, mysterious fog.

His clothes were ornate and bright, the orange fabric of his shirt like a beacon in the night.

In the distance, a lone dog barked, signaling the stranger's arrival as

the man looked up to the same window where the black cat had escaped hours before. He studied the square portal into her small home, the sleeping woman blissfully unaware of the tumultuous storm that raged outside, too swept away by her own internal storm to pay the rain any mind. The man outside raised his hand as he stepped forward, his silk pants clinging to his thick, muscled legs as the rain drenched him. He seemed unaffected by the cold wind, singularly focused on that window as he chanted in a language long-ago forgotten.

His voice sounded heavenly, almost divine as it spilled from his lips, the words weaving a magical spell as he carried out his mission. The man lowered his hand, the words dying in the howls of the storm as he turned to head back into the fog that had birthed him. He slowly faded into nothingness, his ethereal form disappearing into thin air.

It was as if he'd never been here, never existed in this world, the only trace of him the warm spots on the ground where his feet had touched the pavement. The fog that had cloaked him slowly dissipated as the rain poured on, but the air had a different feel to it as the wind intensified before the big brick building. The dog in the distance howled once, and then all was once again silent, the only sound the soft pitter-patter of the rain as it smacked against the desolate concrete sidewalk.

# Chapter 2

Dawn peeked over the jagged mountaintops, casting a mix of shadows and light down over the valley below. A long, wide stone road wound through the jagged rock faces and plentiful greenery, a peaceful serenity in the air as a lone falcon soared above the treetops. The predatory bird hunted for his next meal among the dirt and rocks, his eyesight sharp and focused for any sign of movement. As his shadow passed over a group of rocks, a small mouse tittered in fear, rushing for the cover of the stone behind him; but he was too late, his cries becoming frantic as the deadly talons of the beast closed around his tiny body, capturing him before taking flight once more.

At one end of the road, a caravan of covered wagons, carts, camels, and horses crested the horizon, a silhouette of shadows with the sun at their back as the wooden wheels rolled smoothly along the path. The caravan halted at the base of the valley, where a small town sat nestled among the trees. A group of girls sat on the back of a cart filled with food, fresh fruits grasped in their dainty hands as they giggled together quietly, their flowing dresses dancing around their ankles in the breeze.

A blonde beauty tossed her hair behind her shoulders, her regal posture signaling her status as a noble. She held court with the girls around her, treating them like her loyal subjects. Not far from her sat a group of guards, their heavy armor shining as the steel scales of their breastplates reflected the morning rays. A guard scanned their surroundings, his palm on the hilt of his deadly scimitar as he prepared for anything. Finding no threats, he relaxed his stance, moving to sit with the other guards.

On the back of a different cart, a lone figure lay sprawled across the bags of feed grain for the horses, her arms tangled in a fishing net they'd brought to use along their travels for food. The figure was draped in Greek finery, the canary yellow toga making their tan really stand out against the bright colors. As the wind shifted, the mane of mahogany waves was blown back to reveal the soft lines

and delicate, full cheeks of a beautiful young woman. Her hair had a hint of red tint to it in the sunlight, almost as if she'd woven fire into the strands. The woman lifted a hand to brush the stray tendrils of her hair from her face, groaning at the intrusive sunlight that burned her eyelids with its' warmth.

The woman stirred, feeling around her in confusion, her brows drawing together as she opened her eyes, panic covering her face, distorting her features as she took in her surroundings. She stumbled from the back of the cart, falling to the ground in an unceremonious heap.



\* \* \*

*Where am I?*

Roxanne's brain raced a mile a minute as she struggled to piece together her night. The last thing she remembered was the storm knocking the power out and burning herself on the candle wax. A glance down at her hand would verify she was unhurt as she took in her surroundings.

She didn't recognize anything here; the mountains around them were mostly uninhabited from what she could see, and there was no road. Only a stone path big enough to hold a four-lane highway and a tiny village that looked suspiciously like one of those historical museums turned into a working town to mimic life before the present-day. Glancing down at her clothes, she gasped to find her sweats replaced with ornamental greek clothing. *Period clothing.*

*Classical Greek Period, to be exact.*

Her feet were encased in gladiator sandals, dirt coating her toes and making her feel filthy. She slowly came to recognize the cart she was sleeping in and turned as a voice spoke out to her, the friendly tone laced with concern.

"Hey there, how you feeling?"

Roxanne turned, taking in the strange girl standing before her. Her ruby red hair fell down her back in a thick fishtail braid, stopping just above her waist, and her jade green eyes held concern as she carefully surveyed the panicked woman. Roxanne took note of her more subdued, short toga, lanky body, and her massive collection of freckles that were scattered across her skin, realizing the younger girl must be a greek peasant. She swallowed, shaking her head in frustration and disbelief.

*There has to be some sort of rational explanation. This must be a dream!*

Roxanne pinched herself, wincing at the pain. Definitely not dreaming.

"Like crap. Who are you? Where are we?" Roxanne looked around again, finally noticing the guards sitting beneath the trees, chatting away.

The young girl giggled. "We are slaves, concubines, and laborers sent as a gift to the new king. The Guard picked me up in Susa, so I haven't been with you guys long. Just a couple of days. You've been out cold for two days. They've just left you sleeping in the cart. Nobody but me seems concerned."

Roxanne tried desperately to grasp any part of what she just heard, her mind refusing to cooperate.

*Susa? King? Asleep for two days?*

"Where exactly is Susa? You're wearing Greek clothes, as am I." She gestured wildly at her clothes, panic seeping in and taking root like a poisonous plant.

"Yeah, I'm Greek. From Sparta. But I've been working as a servant in the gardens of Susa." When Roxanne stared blankly at her, slack-jawed and confused, she sighed in frustration. "Persia? Do you know Persia?"

Roxanne felt the bottom drop out of her stomach, but she forced herself to continue, the words strained and harsh. "When you say king, who do you mean?"

The girl chuckled, her frustration turning to disbelief. "You really don't remember anything, do you?" When Roxanne shook her head,



she continued. "You're in a caravan of gifts for the King of Persia, Artaxerxes the Third. We're headed for his palace."

"His palace in Persepolis?" Her head hurt with the amount of thought it took to connect these scattered dots.

"Persepolis. We're about a day or two away from there now, where we will be presented to the king as gifts. He gets to choose what to do with us-- keep us, work us, free us, marry us off. Whatever strikes his fancy, as we are gifts from his brother. Property, as it were. *Malákās*," she muttered under her breath as an afterthought, clearly a greek curse word.

"So, does that mean I'm a slave?" Roxanne looked down at her clothes, unable to keep herself from comparing her clothes with the girl. There were some huge differences.

The girl shook her head, laughing loudly, catching the attention of the guards. "No, no, no. I'm a slave. You are a lady, and a noble one, if I had to guess. Don't you remember who you are?"

Roxanne groaned in frustration, her anger getting the best of her as she realized her hopeless situation. *I am definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto*. "Kind of. But I'm not from here. I'm from, uh-- Athens! That's right, Athens. I'm the daughter of a merchant. I definitely didn't sign up to be given to any king."

The girl analyzed this information as a guard approached them. "Maybe they sold you as a bride? Times are hard over in Athens. And there's gotta be paperwork on you, or they wouldn't have brought you along. Maybe they drugged you, and that's why you've been out this whole time."

Roxanne frowned at the guard who stepped between them, hands on his hips. His Persian scale armor was now recognizable as bits and pieces of the documentary she'd been watching before bed started to come back to her.

"We're headed into the last day of the journey, but we have strict orders for the women to arrive before the goods, so you'll be riding horseback from here on out--"

"I think there's been a mistake, sir, you see--"

The guard cut her off, grabbing her hand as he pulled her towards the other group of girls. There were a few horses without riders that remained tied to the trees, and Roxanne dug her heels into the ground, her feet frantically trying to find purchase in the loose dirt beneath them. The guard growled at her menacingly, but she ignored him, ramping up her struggle as true panic set in.

"Let me GO!" she screamed, her fists thumping uselessly against the guard's armor. She heard the girl yelling as she followed them, trying to get the guard to stop.

But it was no use.

"Stop squirming!"

Still she fought, her feet finding purchase in his shins as she kicked at him like a recalcitrant mule. As the guard recoiled in pain, he dropped his hold on Roxanne, cursing as he fell to the ground. Another guard tried to head her off as she made a break for it, but she was faster, dodging him with ease as she circled a wagon.

Thirty feet ahead was Roxanne's ticket out of here. She'd head straight for whatever authorities there were and--

*Wait. This isn't modern-day America. I'm stuck in a fucking time warp or something, and I have no idea how to even get back.*

Her momentary hesitation was enough for a guard to catch up with her from the side, tackling her to the hard ground. Roxanne didn't seem fazed, though; her body had already gone into shock. She was still processing the idea that she was either in a very realistic dream or had time-traveled to ancient Persia, meaning she was stuck either way.

She counted the stones beneath her head as she lay there, her arm bleeding as the stone's edge beneath her tore through her delicate skin. The wound stung, but she didn't really feel it. Roxanne stared desperately off into the distance, wondering how it could feel this real if it was just a dream. Her side ached as the guard pulled her by her feet, whipping her around on the ground to tie a rope around her feet. As the rough twine curled around one ankle in finality, Roxanne roared to life, kicking the man in the groin before wriggling forward a few feet, her hands scrambling to find purchase

as she tore her knees up.

The feel of a strong hand on her ankle made the bile rise in her throat, the twine returning to her feet, quickly wrapping around her before she could think. The knot was tight and thick, eliminating the chances of running. She felt the first tears fall as her hands were yanked behind her back, wrists bound over and over until she could barely breathe. The unnatural angle her shoulders were in caused a throbbing pain to radiate through her chest, every muscle screaming in protest, but she kept her lips shut.

She wouldn't let them know how much they hurt her. It was a defense mechanism she'd developed from years of being picked on.

She didn't protest as they lifted her from the ground, throwing her unceremoniously over the back of a horse. Her stomach lay against the rough blanket on the horse's back, the view consisting of the ground below its hooves and not much else. Roxanne sighed under her breath as two familiar feet appeared in her line of sight.

"Hey, you can't treat her like that! She's *noble*!" The young girl yelled at the guards with no regard for her own well-being. Roxanne cursed her moxie but praised it under her breath. She was secretly happy to have an ally in this strange place.

The guards ignored the young slave, laughing amongst themselves as they gathered the supplies up.

"She sure doesn't act like a noble, that's for sure."

The snobby girl from earlier joined in, seeing an opening to put herself in the guards' favor. "Yeah, some noble. Sleeps for almost a week, and then tries to run away."

Roxanne's eyes went wide in shock, her head spinning.

*A week? I've been asleep for a week, traveling in this caravan—as a concubine.*

"Where did you pick me up from?" She pleaded with the girl, hoping for an ounce of pity from the angry female, but she was even more confused by the answer.

"We joined the caravan together, you and I, in Sardes, at the request of Ostanes, the King's brother. He holds our papers as concubines,

and he's gifted us to the new king, Artaxerxes the Third. Why they chose *you*, I'll never understand." She looked at Roxanne in distaste but was soon occupied by one of the guards as they disappeared behind a group of bushes.

Roxanne was suddenly glad that she'd been knocked out. Hopefully, none of the guards had shown any interest. Her friend's sandals disappeared from her view as the girl went behind her and slid her down off the horse, helping her stand on her feet.

"She can ride with me, but she's gonna slow us down if she's unable to hold onto me. Can't you tie her arms in front of her?" Her lips turned down in a frown as she studied Roxanne's arms, noticing the rope was already aggravating the skin. Without waiting for a guard, she started untying Roxanne's arms, whispering low as she worked fast.

"You'd best just stay put until we get there, or they'll make it worse for you. I'll probably have to pay for helping you later, but I couldn't let them do that to you." Roxanne didn't even argue as the girl brought her hands in front of her and bound them again, though not as tight as before. "Just keep quiet and let me know if you need to stop for anything. You know, food, bathroom, whatever."

Roxanne flexed her calves when the ropes at her feet were removed, relishing the freedom to move around again. But her new friend was right; it was probably best if she didn't try to run away again.

Where would she even go? "Thanks for all your help, um..."

"Layla," the young girl said, standing with a satisfied smile, the rope rolled up in her hands. "I'm Layla, of Memphis. My parents are war transplants, and I sold myself to help pay for their house after Dad lost a leg. Lucky that's all the sword took from him," she muttered as she looked down at her hands. Roxanne felt bad for this girl who had decided to sell herself for her parents' well-being.

"How old are you, Layla?"

The young girl's head tilted, much like a confused dog, as she eyed Roxanne carefully. "Who are you, my mother?"

Roxanne rolled her eyes, recognizing the rebellious spirit of a

teenager. "I don't want to get you in trouble. I'm just curious."

Layla shrugged, sighing. "I'm sixteen. Most girls my age back home are talking marriage, though."

"Why aren't *you* talking marriage instead of indentured servitude?"

Layla blushed, her eyes refusing to meet Roxanne's curious gaze. "I'm damaged goods. Our town is huge on piety, and my neighbor...well, let's just say he's one of the biggest reasons for my choice to run away-- I mean, sell myself to slavery. At least this way, I get paid and fed and a place to sleep, and maybe I'll be safer than I was back there, on my own most of the time."

Her face didn't show the heavy sorrow and pain that must come from going through such a thing, but Roxanne was no stranger to hiding her feelings. Sadness and pity welled up in her throat for Layla, a child who was taken advantage of and shunned by her people as less than worthy because of someone else's actions.

Roxanne swore to herself that she would help this girl in any way she could while she was here.

*How long would this dream last? The longest dream I can remember was like two days. Surely I'll wake up before a day passes here. Maybe I'll wake up tomorrow and be back at home like nothing ever happened.*

"You're not damaged goods, Layla. Your worth is not determined by what others do to you, but by what you do yourself. Don't let their narrow-mindedness hurt you or make you feel like you're unworthy."

Layla sniffed as she helped Roxanne up onto her horse, jumping up onto the horse's back in front of her before adjusting to the second rider. She rubbed her face furiously before clearing her throat and staring straight ahead, mumbling for Roxanne to throw her hands around her and hold on. Roxanne lifted her hands like a hoop and circled Layla, letting them come to rest against the younger girl's stomach.

*Buckle up. It just might save a life!*

Those signs on the side of the interstate used to make her chuckle. Now, they reminded her with sickening despair that she was far, far

from home.

And she had no idea if she'd ever get back.

# Chapter 3

Layla called to her horse, turning it to fall in line with the other women, all mounted on luxurious steeds.

Tied behind a camel towards the rear was the most stunning horse Roxanne ever seen, its body decked out in the gaudiest metals and gems, shimmering brightly as the horse shifted. Roxanne's jaw dropped as she realized that horse was the only one without a rider.

"Is that my horse?" she asked Layla, nodding to the beautiful Arabian stallion, his black hair like night and day against his brightly colored adornments and chains. Layla nodded, eyeing the horse with longing.

"Yeah, he's beautiful. I'm honestly surprised they sent you with such a beautiful mount if they sold you. These other girls all brought tame mares or camels, but your horse stood out the minute I joined the caravan. He's fierce, and though the others have tried to ride him, they've all been bucked off or kicked. He won't let anyone near him."

The horse reminded her of a similar stallion she'd rode at a friend's stables. She'd never been on a horse, but the boys nearby had been trying to break a stallion with a jet black mane, who was having none of it as he reared back, scaring the teenagers.

His hooves had come dangerously close to their heads, so Roxanne reacted without thinking, running to shove the boys from beneath the horse. She'd knocked them out of the way, feeling herself fall as the horse came down above her. Her eyes had closed as she waited for his hooves to connect with her head.

The crushing blow never came.

When she'd opened her eyes, not daring to breathe, she'd found herself staring into the beast's gaze as he looked down at her, hooves only inches from her cheeks, blowing her hair around as he sniffed her.

She'd ridden the stallion that day, much to the amazement of the boys, and she rode him every time she came back...until she stopped going back.

Something about the way this horse stared at her sent shivers down her spine. A sense of familiarity washed over her, making her homesickness slightly less intense for just a moment.

*Why did she feel such a connection to this horse?* There was no way possible it was her old friend Socrates, the noble horse she'd poured all her pain out to, growing up. But they could have been twins.

Shaking off the strange feeling, Roxanne steadied herself as they started to move, the caravan rolling over the hills and valleys before them.



\* \* \*

They traveled for two more days and yet there was still ground to cover as they closed the distance between them and Persepolis. Roxanne's legs hurt from all the time spent on the horses, and it frustrated her to no end that the guards refused to let her be untied even to sleep. She relied on Layla's acts of kindness to take care of herself as they traveled, and she really wished they wouldn't be separated at the palace. She'd grown quite attached to this slave girl.

Day one, she'd woken up expecting to find herself at home. Upon seeing her surroundings unchanged, she'd broken down into hysterics, her hopes dashed. She'd cried for her mother, wondering if she even knew her daughter was missing. Her school would certainly notice her absence.

On day two, it was still difficult but not as gut-wrenching. She hadn't been able to give up hope, though, and much like she did with her brother, she chose to ignore the harsh reality of the situation. She learned things from her new friend and brushed up on her history lesson as they traveled.



Cassia, as Roxanne had come to know her, truly enjoyed nothing more than dallying with the guards, ensuring she would not be pure for the king when she arrived. Her attitude and quick mouth frequently turned on Roxanne and Layla, who did their best to avoid her like the plague. The blonde sat atop her horse now, looking down at Roxanne as she and Layla ate some fruit, her hands still bound.

The rope had long since shredded her tender wrists, bloodying her sleeves and her ropes, the scabs only lasting for a few hours before being torn off again. Layla tried her best to take care of Roxanne's sores, but there was only so much the water could do to ease her pain.

"What do you want, Cassia? Don't you have an appointment with the guards?"

Roxanne smelled like a wet dog, and she felt even worse. Oh, how wonderful it would be to have a bath. *There was no way they'd present me to the king like this, was there?* She groaned as she stood, her balance still not great.

Cassia sneered at Roxanne, her face twisting into something horrible as Layla joined her in standing.

"I just thought you should know; you'd better wash up in the river and change before we leave in the morning. Wouldn't want you to embarrass the rest of us when you get there. After all, I don't travel with dogs. Slaves are pushing it."

Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she trotted off, leaving a cloud of dust in her wake.

Layla rolled her eyes as they watched Cassia disappear behind a tree with a handsome, younger guard. "She's gonna get married off to an ugly, fat, mean old statesman who knocks her up and has fifty mistresses, just you watch!"

Roxanne laughed at Layla's declaration, picturing it in her mind as she moved to wash her hands with water from the canteen hanging from the horse. They'd let her ride her own horse after the second day, but she'd had to keep it tied to Layla's horse as a gesture of good faith.

Not that she planned to run. Roxanne had no desire to be chased again.



\* \* \*

They woke the next morning before dawn, the horses' anxious movements alerting Roxanne to the fact that something was wrong. Upon further investigation, she found a snake under their collective hooves. One very long stick and a few curses later, she'd managed to move the snake out of harm's way and away from the rest of camp.

She'd been tempted to let it crawl into Cassia's tent, but her senses caught up to her, and she decided against it. Shame, really. Cassia was one of those people who made you want to punch them every time they opened their mouths.

The guards checked all the goods and supplies before doing a headcount and saddling up to ride. The caravan never wasted time when it came to travel. The road could take months to cross with a larger caravan, so it was really fortunate that they'd managed to make the trip in two weeks, double what a single rider with a sense of urgency could manage. Roxanne was just happy she'd been out cold for most of the ride, apparently.

She'd resigned herself to the fact that she wasn't gonna magically wake up in the morning and be back home, and desolation had started to set in. Her depressed mood did not go unnoticed by Layla, who did whatever she could to make Roxanne smile and laugh.

"Hey, Roxanne, come on now. We will be there before the sun sets today, and then we can find someone to straighten your situation out."

Cassia had said Roxanne boarded the caravan willingly with her, but Layla had overheard her laughing with the other girls about how her brother had brought her to the docks, unconscious and

veiled, and signed her over for a sum of money.

*How apt a comparison*, Roxanne thought dryly. Her own brother in real life would probably sell her for money, if she were being realistic.

Legally, in Athens, she'd have control over her own fate, but here in Persia, where she'd been sold into what was essentially the ancient sex trafficking trade, her papered status held more weight than her word.

She could only hope the king would take pity on her and honor her imaginary status as an Athenian citizen.



\* \* \*

"I've never seen anything so splendid, Layla," she said as they stood on the hilltop, waiting for the others to finish their business behind the bushes. Roxanne looked out to the huge metropolis below them, the rooftops and tall towers breaking up the grassy hillsides. There were shiny spires at the tops of tall towers, houses of worship adorned with vibrant colors and reflective metals. There were stone slabs taller than three grown men, and the city stretched for miles, only a portion visible in the midday sun.

Roxanne frowned at the imposing city, wishing for the familiarity of home. Her town wasn't tiny, but it wasn't this big. You could still get lost in it, but everyone knew your name. Here, she knew not a single soul, and anxiety pooled in the pit of her stomach at the possibility of having to live with strangers. Getting married off to one would be equally as frightening.

Jesus, she hoped she didn't get married off. She'd work, but she really wasn't trying to be a whore for men's amusement in some secluded harem. She was bright, fast, and a hard worker. Surely they'd rather pick a prettier girl for the concubine position.

She turned to look back at her friend, who was busy braiding her

own hair again. Layla was always meticulous about it and spent almost an hour each day redoing the braid from the day before. Her lush red hair was thick and often frizzy and wild, so braiding it eliminated the need for constant upkeep, as their travels did a number on the redhead's mane. Roxanne envied the bright coloring atop her head; her own brown hair just looked like a slack chocolate bar in comparison as it fell across her freshly tanned shoulders.

"It is something. I've seen a lot of cities like this one, and they're all breathtaking until you're inside them. You'll find quickly that the people in cities turn the beautiful mosaic floors into something dark and evil if you look in the right direction."

*So even the ancient civilizations had a dark side of sorts.*

Roxanne cringed inwardly as she realized what they sold there, in the darker sides of these cities.

*Humans.*

It was probably where she was purchased or sold before joining the caravan. "You came from Egypt, right? What are their cities like?"

Layla nodded, her eyes glazing over as she thought back to her home. "Outskirts of it, but yes. Memphis was enormous. If you think this is stunning, you should see their pyramids and the Sphinx."

Roxanne looked back to the metropolitan with unease, her worry sneaking back up again.

"Do you think I'll ever get to go home?" she asked, speaking more to herself than to Layla.

Layla glanced at her friend, her braid freezing in her fingers as she studied the older girl with pity. "I hope so, Roxanne."

*Yeah, I hope so, too,* she thought as they moved to mount up and head for the gates of the city before them.

## Chapter 4

"Wow. Just...wow." Roxanne whispered in awe as she stood at the base of the *Apadana*, a large hall in Persepolis where the king held ceremonies and religious rites. The streets surrounding it were packed, as was the hall itself--if the noise level was anything to go by. The guard tugged on her rope, trying to get her to move faster as he led the group to their final destination. Roxanne hissed at the pain in her wrists, feeling the warmth of her own blood fresh on her fingertips, but pressed on, picking up the pace.

The hall was massive, nestled between twin staircases that must have been built for gods, the steps seemingly endless and intimidating. Everything here was so lavish, a stark contrast to her old life; even the floors she walked on now were of the most stunning marble and slate.

The green stucco walls contrasted nicely with the gold and silver statues scattered around the entries like gargoyles, guardians of their home. Atop every massive pillar—if one could see that far—were vast statues of animals, both real and mythical, their glamorous visages staring down on the crowd below. She saw two-headed lions, falcons, hippos, and alligators, trying to take it all in.

Roxanne moved to stare at the glimmering windows, some reaching to the ceiling as the evening sun poured through them. Beneath her feet, the stone and tile mosaic floor shimmered in the red-hued light that caught the reflective pieces. As she struggled to memorize as much as she could, her body thrummed with the nervous energy that came from being watched.

Roxanne felt like a mouse in an open field-- exposed and weak; easy prey. With her hands still bound before her, she was even more vulnerable, unable to defend herself if someone should attempt to hurt her. She couldn't escape, couldn't run. It was pointless to fantasize that she could get anywhere without help, and that didn't seem too forthcoming.

Somehow, she had to explain to someone that this was all a mistake. Maybe she would be let go; if only they would listen to her.

As she crossed the large expanse of the columned hall, a deep, seductive laugh caught her ear, and her body turned to the sound like a sunflower seeking the light of the sun each day. It felt as if to be in the presence of its source was to feed her soul. She didn't register the other girls as they whispered for her to stop as she split from the ranks, her feet moving of their own accord towards the melodious voice. As she rounded another column, she spotted the man whose carefree laughter had drawn her away from her escorts.

His wavy mane of luscious hair was as dark as a raven's feathers, flowing weightlessly over his shoulders like a black silk waterfall. It teased the collarbone of his bare chest, a small trail of matching hair blazing a path to the waist of his pants, where the silk fabric did little to conceal what lay beneath.

*Oh, my.*

Rebekah gasped for air, her breath stolen by his rugged beauty as she watched him stroke the stubble that lined his strong jaw. His toned muscles glistened from sweat in the fading light, and his smile charmed the women who swooned around him, watching his body like hungry buzzards at a butcher's backdoor.

A dozen or so gold bangles hung from his wrist as he moved between the women, his eyes falling to Roxanne as he scanned the crowd. Unlike with the other women whose eyes he'd looked into, her gaze transfixed him. Her deep amber eyes glowed like an Arabian sunset, inviting him to take a closer look. He felt drawn to this woman, the chestnut-haired beauty at the edge of the crowd whose eyes were unable to look away.

Roxanne panicked as she noticed the man moving towards her. Her feet flew as they transported her back to the place she'd left the group, shoving bodies out of her way frantically as the fear of being caught grew in the pit of her stomach. She stumbled into the walkway where the girls had been led, only to find they had disappeared. Scared and panicked, her fight or flight instincts kicked in as she moved to the far wall, hoping to be able to catch a

glimpse of the group she'd lost from a safe vantage point.

Just as her shoulders began to sag against the stone slabs, she felt the rope that bound her hands yanked backward, tripping her. She briefly regretted swinging on that guard during the trip as she waited for the impact. She could not brace herself; her hands were immobilized.

As Roxanne fell to the ground, her eyes focused on the white silk pants and Athenian thong sandals on two tanned feet before a pair of strong arms caught her, saving her body from the bruises she'd undoubtedly have received from the stone floor. She blinked, stunned as she looked up to thank her savior, her eyes widening as she took in the same mane of black hair and slight stubble. He smiled down at her wickedly, turning her insides to mush.

Roxanne opened and closed her mouth like a fish out of water, feeling as stupid as a guppy flopping on the docks as she fought to make her voice work again. Her cheeks warmed in embarrassment as she imagined how she must look to this stunning man who had not a single hair out of place. He patiently waited for her to speak, his arms wrapped securely around her shoulders as he knelt on the floor.

She really had been seconds away from possible brain damage.

Roxanne closed her eyes as she struggled to break whatever spell this man held over her. She spoke clearly, slowly, hoping there wasn't a language barrier.

"Thank you for catching me."

She peeked through her lashes to see the stranger smiling devilishly down at her, merriment dancing in his eyes as he studied her.

*Please let him understand.*

The man tossed his head like a stallion, his piercings shimmering in the fading rays as he opened his mouth, the perfect harmony that was his voice spilling from his lips.

"It was the least I could do, considering I'm the one who tripped you. I had only meant to stop you. I had no idea you were bound." His eyes traveled down to her hands, frowning at the angry red sore

he found burned into her skin beneath it. "Who did this to you? Tied you up?"

She blushed, remembering how she'd fought the guards that had tried to get her to mount the horse in Susa, kicking one and head-butting the other, her fists flying in a frantic attempt to escape. She'd connected a hit or two before they'd thrown her to the ground and tied her like a trussed pig for a banquet.

She'd squealed like one, too, her cries for relief falling on deaf ears as they transported the new king's "gifts" to Persepolis.

"My captors! I have been kidnapped; there must be some mistake—"

His brows rose at her declaration, but his smirk never moved, making her feel like she was once again a tiny mouse caught in some trap she didn't yet understand. His hands against her back moved slowly, sitting her upon his knee as he moved his calloused fingers over her sore arms. He brought them down to her wrists agonizingly slow, as if to intentionally torture her.

Roxanne bit back a cry of pain as his rough skin tore at her hot, raw flesh. She hissed as she felt the blood drip from her arm, watching as it pooled at her feet, splattering his beautiful white pants with her life force and ruining the creamy white silk. Her eyes burned from the tears she fought to contain; she didn't want to look pathetic while trying to save herself from becoming a concubine or slave to some fat, pompous, selfish king.

"Who are your captors, and where are they? Why have they brought you to the *Apadana*?"

"I don't know where they went--I was looking for them when I fell. They claim to be my guards, but I know none of them. They're here to deliver a caravan of gifts for the new king." She lowered her voice, a hint of anger threading through her words as she muttered to herself. "They fancy me one of these 'gifts' for the king, from what I understand."

His eyes roved over her appreciatively as he pulled the last of the rope from her sore skin, taking in her beauty as she waited for him to speak.

"A gift for the king, is that so? It sounds as if you disagree. We'd



better find these men and straighten this situation out."

He reached down to the base of his pant leg, tearing off a strip of the silk before reaching to the other leg to do the same. Roxanne flinched as he laid the soft fabric against her bloody wrists, wrapping her injuries to stop the bleeding. She sighed as his hands finally tied off the last makeshift bandage, the smooth fabric a relief from the rough hemp of the rope she'd worn for days. She'd be lucky if those wounds didn't get infected from the sub-par conditions of the ancient world.

Hopefully, they'd have something new for her to wear since her dress was covered in the filth from her travels, dust from the road discoloring the beautiful yellow toga she'd been wearing when she awoke three days ago.

The beautiful man helped Roxanne to her feet, bidding her follow him as he weaved through the throng of people who had gathered for the celebration. The crowd seemed to part for him, almost as if every person here recognized him. Roxanne bit back her growing fear of everyone eyeing her as she passed by, close on the heels of the man ahead. He moved quickly, dodging this way and that until she realized she'd lost him.

She was now standing in the group of women she'd been separated from. Beside her, Cassia sneered, eyeing her with distaste. Her voice dripped with sarcasm as she spoke down at Roxanne.

"So nice of you to join us, Athenian dog. I can't wait to see what fat nobleman the king marries you off to." Her lips curled in a sneer as she lowered her voice to a whisper, her eyes full of hate and anger as she held court over what she considered to be the lesser women. "I hear the king had his entire family killed to protect himself from jealous relatives trying to take his crown. A bloodthirsty demon, capable of toppling whole battalions of men with his bare hands. Some even say he's a god, a deity like Xerxes I. I hope to catch his eye today. *I would make a good wife.*"

Some of the girls around her shivered, but Roxanne stood firm, ignoring Cassia's attempts to scare her. She'd seen worse than most of these people could even imagine; surely this one man couldn't be all they claimed he was.

*Could he?*

Roxanne found a familiar face just behind Cassia. She smiled at Layla, the Spartan slave girl from Susa. She had been sent as a slave to the king's queen, who hadn't been announced yet. He hadn't picked a woman to fill the role, but the girls in the bunch speculated it would fall to his half-sister Atossa, who he'd married a year ago, per Persian customs.

Or at least that's what she vaguely remembered from her class. Persian men of power always married in the family or other noble families for political alliances. All societies of the Old World had some form of this tradition. Roxanne had gotten a crash course in Persian customs and life from Layla by feigning ignorance.

But was it really faking? She honestly didn't know.

Her cover story would suffice for now, so long as no one asked too many questions about the details. She had decided to stick as close to the truth as possible, hoping to be able to keep the lie straight. Unfortunately, acting had never really been her thing, and it was painfully evident at times.

"Layla! I'm so glad to see *you*. Come, you must tell me all about what I've missed. Where did the guards run off to?" Roxanne scanned the perimeter of their group, finding the lack of guards concerning. Layla's gasp brought her crashing back to reality.

"What happened to your ropes? And where did you get such expensive silks to tie around your wounds?"

Roxanne blushed, remembering the way she'd felt in the beautiful man's arms as he gently saved her from falling. "I ran into the most enchanting beauty I've ever seen, with a voice like a summer songbird and a smile that could melt the polar ice caps--"

Layla frowned at her comparison, confused. "The polar what?"

"Nevermind," Roxanne said, shaking her head. "Anyways, he was wearing these white pants, and when he saw my wrists, he took the rope off and wrapped my wounds in the strips he tore from the cuffs of each leg. And then he brought me back here, and I lost him."

She looked around as the crowd went silent, turning to face the setting sun as a group of people approached them. Roxanne recognized the guard that had tied her up, and she stuck her tongue out at him, wiggling her hands triumphantly as he bristled in anger. He started to move towards her but thought better of it before turning to look behind him. He and the guard next to him split apart as the frontman addressed the crowd.

"All hail Artaxerxes the Third, King of Persia!"

The crowd gushed as a figure stepped forward, dripping with an obscene amount of gold and jewels as if he were made of the precious gems. The sun glinted off the shiny metals, his face obscured by the light that filtered in from behind him, casting his whole identity into shadow as he approached them slowly, deliberately. He made his way over to the group of girls as the guard who'd bound Roxanne fell all over him, extolling the value of the treasures he'd brought for the new king.

Roxane's heart sank as the shadow man, *the king*, spoke to the guard in a lilting, masculine voice she recognized. Her face paled as Layla looked at the man's feet, where his torn pant legs were easily visible. Layla's gaze moved to Roxanne, who stood still as a stone, in shock at the new revelation.

The man who had helped her, who had tenderly bandaged her wounds, was none other than the king himself—the man she had been gifted to, the man who now owned her. Roxanne felt the talons of the predator snap closed around her, and much like the mouse in the field, she knew she had been captured.

# Chapter 5

"So we meet again, little bird. Tell me, are you *surprised*?"

If there were an award for the biggest idiot, she would probably win it. Roxanne stared in open-mouthed shock at the king, his smile setting her on a tilt.

She was supposed to be a gift for the gorgeous Persian man she'd ever met. Her prospects had both dimmed and brightened at the same time. However, as she opened her mouth to speak to him, Cassia shoved her aside, letting her buxom breast jiggle enticingly in front of the king. The guard's eyes popped out of his head at such a wanton display of womanhood, but the king merely eyed her up and down before turning away to face Roxanne again.

When his hand reached out to grasp hers, she winced, a slight shock reminding her of her injuries. The king, however, was gentle with her, tugging only slightly to indicate he wanted her to follow him. Roxanne turned back to look at Layla pleadingly, but the poor girl just waved her on happily, oblivious to Roxanne's distress.

"Your highness, there must be some mistake, you see—"

"Hush, now. A beauty such as yourself shouldn't be treated so terribly, especially when under the protection of the king. These men, your guards, did they not offer you a change of clothes? A bath? Access to your belongings?"

Roxanne sighed, following on behind him as she rehashed her cover story in her mind. She couldn't tell this man she was out of time and space, a misfit in an ancient world nobody from her time had ever seen. "I believe my brother may have sold me to your uncle in an attempt to cover some of his own debts. The others recalled that I was unconscious when I joined their caravan, but the guards did not find it concerning. I have a family that I need to get back to--"

"What if it was your family that sold you to me? What if your brother wasn't the only one who had a hand in it? Would you still

want to go back to them?" He had stopped under an alcove in the wall of the Apadana, pulling her out of sight.

And very, very close to his own body.

"Tell me, little bird, would you not wish to stay here, where you could have a better life than the one you led before?"

Roxanne stared up at him with a puzzled frown. Her eyes flickered from wonder and awe to an offended rage simmering just below the surface. Surely this man wasn't used to giving those beneath him the time of day, but here he was, acting like her knight-in-shining-armor and telling her she might as well give up in the same breath. From what she'd heard of Persian rulers, they were a ruthless bunch, and their subjects revered them like gods. The last thing she wanted to do was anger someone who walked around with the status of a deity, but she knew there must be a catch.

"Okay, so what's your benefit from this arrangement? I'm no idiot, and I know you're not doing this out of the kindness of your heart."

His palm pressed against the small of her back, forcing her to lean into him, her hands braced against his firm chest. *Gods, I wish they made men like this back in my time*, she mused as her fingers flexed involuntarily against his skin, mapping out his muscles for later.

"My benefit? Well, you *are* my property, technically, so obviously, your presence in the silks would be for my benefit, and while I do enjoy a rowdy fuck from time to time, I like my women willing. I'd hate to have to fight a beautiful, delicate flower such as yourself."

His voice was like honey, dripping over her senses and drawing away from the words he spewed. Roxanne felt a blush creep up her cheeks and yanked her hands away from his body like she'd been burned.

"A concubine?"

*You can't mess up the timeline. Remember that, if you ever wanna get back home, stupid.*

Roxanne was so busy giving herself the fifth degree about her attraction to him that she missed the look of obvious lust in the king's eyes. He leaned in towards her body, his hand still at her

back as he whispered in her ear.

"Does my little songbird have a name?"

His lips against the sensitive skin at the base of her jaw sent shivers down her spine, and the king was not oblivious to her reaction. His hands trailed down her back as his tongue teased the hollow of her collarbone.

Roxanne stuttered a response out, hoping to get the encounter over with. "R-Roxanne. My name, it's, uh . . . Roxanne."

The king smiled at her, pulling her hips flush against his own. "Ah, such a beautiful name. A form of our own Roxani. I think I shall call you Roxani--"

"But that's not--" She began to protest, but the king held up a hand in warning, effectively silencing her objections.

"I will call you what I want, and from here on out, your name is Roxani."

"King or no king, my *name* is *Roxanne*."

He bared his teeth in a genuinely frightening smile, and Roxanne knew she'd crossed a line she shouldn't have. As his eyes turned cold, her heart sank as she realized the brazen move might have just signed away any chance of returning home to be had.

She waited for the slap or the admonishment, but it never came. Morbidly curious, Roxanne cast her gaze up to meet the king's own, which had turned utterly feral as he bent down and covered her lips with his own.



\* \* \*

*I shouldn't be doing this, but she tastes so good.*

He groaned against her lips, their plumpness making him heady with desire. He snaked the tip of his tongue out to tease the crease

between them and took full advantage when a gasp escaped her, tangling their tongues in a passionate dance.

Her movements were unsure, hesitant even, as if nobody had kissed her like this before. But her people were not a shy bunch; she *must* have been kissed at some point in her life, as beautiful as she was. The king felt her hands start to creep up his chest, and he let out a rumbling purr much like that of a big cat as her fingers set his skin alight.

Until she shoved him backward.

He stared at her, his eyes wide and incredulous at her sudden rejection of his advances. Since when did a woman spurn the king's advances?

"Were you not enjoying yourself, Roxani?" His devil-may-care attitude and his cocky arrogance set her on edge, and he watched her cross her arms to cover the rise and fall of her chest as she struggled to breathe.

"I told you that's not my name."

He quirked an eyebrow. There had never been a time in his adult life when someone had spoken back to him as much as this one woman had managed in an hour. He was both infuriated and intrigued, leaning towards his prey, his face only inches from hers. To her credit, she did not move, matching his arrogance with an iron will.

"And I told you I would call you what I want." His smile twitched upwards as he realized he hadn't introduced himself. "I almost forgot to tell you my name."

Roxanne laughed at the irony of it all. "Yes, you did, King Artaxerxes the Thir--"

"No," he said, a frown on his face. "That's my family title. My *name* is Ochus."

"*Ochus*," she muttered, testing the word out on her tongue. "It doesn't suit you."

"And what would you call me, then, *Roxani*?" He crossed his arms to match her own, and a conniving smirk spread slowly across her

delicate features, much resembling a hyena in the desert.

*This did not look good*, he mused.

"Well, since you're determined to misname me after I've asked you not to, maybe I should give *you* a nickname as well."

He raised a brow but said nothing, waiting to hear what she would come up with. When she finally spoke, he had to fight to keep from laughing at the absurdity of it all.

"*Arty*. Shortened from your family name since we're only strangers."

If his brows could ascend any further into his hairline, they'd disappear into nothingness. Ochus leaned in closer, his face so close their noses were practically touching. His grin was so wide it swallowed his face; she couldn't look away, no matter how much she wanted to.

"Do you make a habit out of kissing complete strangers named Arty, then?"

A blush climbed rapidly up her neck, dotting her face with a lovely pinkness as she bathed in her embarrassment. "I've not made it a habit to *ever* kiss a stranger. It was *you* who kissed *me*."

"I didn't exactly feel you protesting at first."

Roxanne turned and started to march off, but strong arms encircled her waist, lifting her off the ground. She felt weightless in his arms as Ochus fought against her weak struggle. When he finally felt her give in, he set her on her feet before him, her eyes meeting his.

*This one has a bit of a fighter in her. I think I'll keep her.*

"I think it's time we return to the others, don't you, Roxani?"

Beneath her frown was the beginnings of a frustrated smile she couldn't completely hide. Not trusting her own voice, Roxanne simply nodded her agreement and let him lead her back to the others. They found the group still standing where they'd left them just minutes before. With a few words to the guards standing around, the girls were arranged in a line, guards at each side. The sequence of women was stretched before the king like a buffet, and Roxani moved to join them.



She was stopped by a hand on her arm, pulling her back. She turned to see Ochus wearing a broad smile, mischief plain on his face. By this time, a small crowd had gathered around them, watching what must be a regular occurrence for a king.

After all, offerings of tribute were a common way to buy protection from the elite and powerful. Ochus looked the line of women up and down as he stood with his hand around her upper arm beside him. Roxanne's eyes met Cassia's, and she couldn't help but feel a slight sort of satisfaction in the way her enemy now glared at her coveted position beside the king.

"You, on the end, what's your name?" Ochus sounded almost bored as he gathered info from each girl in line, giving them each a status and level as he moved on to the next one. Finally, his eyes lit upon Cassia, and Roxanne tensed beside him, trying not to show her anxiety over her fate.

"What is your name?"

"I'm Cassia, of the--"

"Where you hail from is of no matter to me." Ochus looked at the girl's nasty glare, knowing right off he would never find himself in that viper's sleeping silks. She looked like she'd shared herself around the guards, from the way they eyed her with barely concealed lust. Still, he couldn't turn down a gift, and he wanted to ask his little songbird what to do with her. From her body language, this woman before him caused Roxanne some distress. He turned to her, his lips against her ear as he whispered to her.

"She seems nasty. It would be a shame if I made her a lower status to fit her low-class attitude."

Roxanne managed to stay stone-still, but a smile cracked at the edge of her lips as she let him see her approval of such an idea.

"You will be staying in my Queen's Quarters, and you will be a servant in the concubine quarters. If one of my ladies has a use for you, you are to see to it that their needs are met."

His eyes moved to the next woman, Layla, but before he could open his mouth, Cassia screeched out a protest.

"Your *Highness*, I do believe you've made a mistake. I am no servant--"

Ochus moved forward until he was nose to nose with the rude and tactless woman. *She honestly did not know her place here.* His smile was laced with a heavy dislike for this woman. "You are what I say you are, *servant*, and do not forget who you talk to. You are in the presence of a king. Act like it, or you won't live to *see* the Queen's quarters."

When he turned to Layla, the girl had her head down, averting her gaze. "Name, girl?"

She looked up and focused on his shoulder, trying to avoid eye contact. "Layla, your highness."

"Layla, you'll--"

A melodic voice interrupted him, and this time, instead of boiling rage, he felt himself melting at the sound of it.

"C-can I have her? If you're k-keeping me, that is. I like Layla, and she's been super helpful and took care of me when my wrists were bound during the trip."

Ochus looked back at his little songbird, a slight smile forming on his lips. "You would ask me to give you this girl as a servant, then?"

"I would like her to have the status of a lady in waiting."

"A what?" he asked, perplexed.

"She's not a slave."

Ochus's eyes widened in understanding. "Oh, you mean as a handmaiden?"

Roxanne gulped as she nodded, hoping he liked her enough not to separate them. His smirk soon turned into a cunning grin, and Roxanne knew it wouldn't just be as easy as asking for a favor.

"On one condition, my little songbird. You must stay here with me, as one of my wives."

Roxanne's heart sank. She didn't want to lie to the man, but she also didn't want to be here. She couldn't afford to upset the timeline--if

that was a thing--but what harm would come from letting him believe she would stay?

"I will stay, as y-your wife, then."

His satisfied smile warmed her heart as he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off her feet. He motioned for Layla to follow, and a guard led the rest of the women away as Ochus carried Roxanne down the stairs of the Apadana, heading for his chambers in the castle.

He had other wives, sure, but this one intrigued him like no other, and he was determined to figure out all of her, one layer at a time, like a beautiful flower.

# Chapter 6

~Artaxerxes III~

I'd give this woman anything she asked for, for the chance to have her exclusively to myself. I had never wanted a woman as much as I wanted this fiery little she-devil, and every strong Persian king needed an equally strong queen. She just might make a good one, though I'd have to convince her to release that tiger she had locked behind her little songbird act.

*I wonder if she would sing for me in the silks when I bed her tonight.*

The slave girl trailed behind us, on my heels like a faithful dog. I'd been surprised my Roxani had asked for me to give her a handmaiden when she could have asked for anything. She'd passed up the opportunity to request the finest of silks, yards of the rarest indigo fabrics, piles of plush pillows, horses of the finest breeding stock. She could have asked for the moon, and somehow, I would have gotten it for her. But she'd asked me to free her friend and give her a job.

I'd never met someone so considerate of others. Sure, she benefited from the arrangement, too, but her request meant I would free this girl, and she wouldn't be required to stay if she didn't want to. All the noblewomen I'd ever met had grown up thinking they were better than the working class, so Roxani's attitude was a refreshing breath of air. It got old and irritating watching the wives my father had taken constantly talk down to my friends among the slaves. I wanted better for my household.

I chanced a glance down at Roxani, who had fallen silent. I wondered what was on her mind as I watched her stare off into space, her eyes unfocused. A single tear escaped the corner of her eye, but I paid it no mind. My eyes had already traveled to her perfectly rounded chest, slipping out from behind the top of her tunic.

Oh yes, she would be a treat tonight. *And I always finished my dessert.*



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

I had no idea what was going to happen next. One minute I'd been standing there, waiting to be sent off as the wife of some nobleman from the middle of nowhere with seven wives and a huge gut, and the next, I'm being carried bridal style by the most gorgeous, sinfully tan man I'd ever met. He hadn't hesitated when I'd asked for Layla, and for that, I was grateful. I needed someone I could trust in this strange place, and Layla hadn't done me wrong yet.

But he'd made me promise to stay as his wife, and I *had* promised. My word had always been golden, but I knew this promise was one I couldn't possibly keep. I couldn't stay here forever. What would happen to my family? What would happen to the future if I altered the past? All of this was too much to carry as one person, and I felt tears burning at the corners of my eyes. I tried to blink them away, but the stinging persisted, and a single tear escaped me.

The king hadn't seemed to notice, and he continued without a word until we reached the far courtyard. A cart waited there, surrounded by several horses and a couple of guards. He set me down beside the cart, my legs barely holding me up as he turned to whisper to the guard next to him. Layla stood beside me, offering her arm as I steadied myself.

I was not used to being carried.

"You girls will come with me to the Queen's Residence, and I will send a guard to retrieve your belongings."

Layla held her hand up to stop him. The king looked over to her, but there was no malice in his gaze. "Sir, if you send someone else, he won't know what to take, and I doubt the envoy will be honest.

So why don't you let me go with the guard, and I can make sure all our personal effects are intact."

He nodded, his eyes widening. It was apparent he hadn't thought of the possibility of someone not being honest with the king's belongings. "You make a good point. Take my two men here, and be quick. You two, make sure the other women or the guards do not give her any trouble. She's to get everything she asks for." He looked back at me, a strange look in his eyes. "Are you okay with going along with me while your friend gets your things? We can get you seen by the doctor for those nasty cuts on your wrist, and I could show you around."

I nodded, at a loss for words. I'd expected some barbaric man, hell-bent on raping and pillaging like the Greek stories told of the great Persian Empire, but this man before me was gentle, if a little pushy, with a healthy consideration for my well-being. I'd traveled for several days in the company of strangers, so what was one more? I looked over to Layla, who studied me intently.

"You can go; I'll be alright until you get back." I watched her turn and escort the guards back the way we had come, her steps light and quick. The guards with her struggled to keep up under their bulky metal armor, but they managed and soon disappeared.

"Are you ready, Roxani?" The king grabbed the reins of a beautiful white mare from a nearby guard, reaching out to take my hand. I groaned at his new name for me.

I had no intention of letting him change my name, even if he *was* a king.

"*Roxanne*, and yes, I am ready." My teeth ground together in frustration, making my words sound harsher than I intended. The king winced slightly at my tone but said nothing as I put my hand in his, choosing to trust him for the time being.

*What other choice did I have, a world away from my own?*

His hand closed around mine, pulling me forward as his other wrapped around my waist. The king hoisted me up onto the back of the horse and swung up effortlessly behind me. My yellow toga had hiked up to my thighs as I side-straddled this magnificent horse,

and I struggled against the unforgiving fabric as I tried to conceal as much as I could. Ochus behind me laughed merrily at my distress, choosing to say nothing as he wrapped one hand around the reins and the other moved to hold me securely in place.

Oh, how I wished we'd have brought my horse; anything to save me from this embarrassment.

With a short click of his tongue, he spurred the horse onward, and we were off, the muscular horse jerking so suddenly I nearly fell off. Had it not been for Ochus's arm, I would have been trampled. His laughing had stopped, replaced by another emotion out of the ordinary for a Persian king--concern.

"I thought you would know how to ride a horse; you should relax. I won't let you fall, Roxani."

I huffed under my breath as his words tickled the skin just below my earlobe. A silent shiver went down my spine as I felt the warmth of those words heating my skin.

"I *do* know how to ride a horse, sir. The problem is I don't usually ride with a passenger, and I'm not holding the reins."

I could hear the smile in his voice as he whispered low enough for only the two of us to hear.

"I'll let you hold the reins when I take you for a ride later tonight, little tiger."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at his brazen words, knowing I had *no* intention of sleeping with this seductive man. *Wife or no wife.* "Ugh, does that actually work on other women, or are you testing out new pickup lines?"

"Pickup lines? What do you mean?"

*Shit. I'd forgotten I was in ancient Persia. They probably didn't call them pickup lines back then . . . back now. Man, this was confusing.*

"Uh . . . when you're courting a woman, do you tell all your conquests that, or just the new ones?"

He pulled the reins back on the mare, bringing her to an immediate stop. The guards halted ahead of us, waiting for their master to

proceed again. I felt Ochus lean into me, his rock-hard abs pressed against the small of my back as his chin appeared over my shoulder. His hand snaked out and grabbed my chin roughly, yanking my face up to meet his gaze.

"You think I tell all these women they are special?" He sounded offended as his gaze penetrated my calm outward appearance, shaking me to my core. His voice was barely a growl. "I am not some arrogant jackass who lies to women just to bed them, Roxani. I need no help in warming my sleeping silks; they all clamor to get the chance to spend time with me."

"Well, aren't you just full of yourself? I agree to be your wife, and all of a sudden, you've gone from charming gentleman to arrogant braggart." I huffed, turning away from his intense eyes to buy myself some time. The look in them was almost enough to melt me into a puddle, but I couldn't get distracted. Any day now, I might just end up back in my own time, and I didn't want to return to some crazy, messed up alternate timeline where my actions here had changed the world.

Behind me, Ochus leaned back, nudging the horse forward with his heels. We were moving once more, and he didn't bother to make more conversation until we arrived at a massive stone structure. Pillars framed the enormous doorway to the great hall, and I couldn't disguise my astonishment at the sheer enormity and ornateness of what was to be my temporary home.

The stone steps were engraved with pictures resembling hieroglyphs, depicting scenes of women and children. Someone had spent days, weeks, months on this work, carving all of this by hand, all to be walked over and ignored as if the work didn't even exist. We stopped at the top of the stairs, where the horses were tethered to a hitching post next to the large opening of the main building.

The stone hall served as an outdoor bazaar of sorts, covering the occupants from the sun and rain but leaving them open to the fresh air. Beneath the outer stone casing, a secondary building had been built, which appeared to house most of the women currently milling about the open area.

Ochus took my hand and wordlessly led me through the central



archway, stopping to speak to a guard posted by the horses.

"When the rest of my entourage arrives, have someone lead them to the queen's quarters."

The guard nodded but said nothing, standing at attention as we made our way past him. Once we were in view of all the inhabitants of the residence, I felt the familiar sensation of being watched. Everyone had turned to see the king leading a strange woman around, intrigue and confusion evident on most faces. A few women wore a look of contempt; some even appeared angry.

From the far side of the open hall, a dark woman with hair as black as night came running over to Ochus, nearly knocking him off his feet from the force of her impact as she flung herself into his arms. I felt my hand ripped from his, a hiss of pain escaping my lips as the tender skin of my wrist stretched beneath the forming scab. The white fabric around the offending hand soaked with blood almost instantly, the red splotch blossoming out until it was the size of a hibiscus in bloom. Unfortunately, the silk wasn't made to retain blood, and I could feel the wetness from the fresh wound start to drip down my hand.

The woman paid me no mind as she planted a kiss directly onto Ochus's lips, wrapping herself seductively around his body as he tried to pry her away. Her high-pitched voice grated on my nerves as she loudly claimed the man between us.

"Oh, *My King!* I am so happy to see you! Did you finally decide to crown me queen? Or are you back for another round?"

He groaned as she finally loosened her grip enough for him to escape her clutches, and he turned to me and mouthed "Sorry" before turning to the obnoxious woman.

"Atossa, for the last time, please refrain from flinging yourself at me at random. I do not appreciate the abandonment of normal decorum in my presence. Have some self-respect."

He dusted off his shirt, trying to remove all traces of her. Atossa pouted, her arms crossed as she peered over his shoulder at me.

"And who is *this*, your highness? A new slave?" She turned her nose up at the sight of my tattered, dirty toga, and I couldn't fault her for

it. I did look like a mess. Although she was pretty rude about it, in my opinion, she was still obviously someone close to the king, and I would put up with her for now. I had no desire to make waves.

"Atossa, this is Roxani, my new wife."

Atossa choked on the snide comment she'd been about to make, her face turning an excellent shade of red. It reminded me of the gala apples my grandmother had grown in the backyard before we'd had to cut the tree down. She sputtered like an engine that just wouldn't start, struggling to find words.

"She's going to be your new wife? But what do you need another for when you already neglect *this one*?" She swung a fist at Ochus's hard chest, but his hand flew out to catch her by the wrist, stopping her in her tracks. She seemed not to care, trying her hand again at another good swing. He blocked that one, too, his mouth turning down in a frown.

"You would assault your king, Atossa? Cousin or not, you are still not above being sent off. I will not tolerate disrespect in my palace, and you will not be disrespectful to anyone else, either. Have I made myself clear?"

Atossa stomped her feet, acting like a churlish child who wasn't used to hearing the word no. She spat out a reply, her words short and aggressive. "Yes. Perfectly clear, *your highness*."

"Good," he said, nodding his head. "You're dismissed."

Atossa threw one last jibe over her shoulder at me before walking away. "See you around, *my king*. I'll make sure to save you a spot in my silks tonight."

"For the last time, Atossa, not in a million years."

"We'll see..." Her hips swayed exaggeratedly as she sashayed away. She huffed off when she realized Ochus wasn't even looking her way. His eyes were instead trained on me, once again laced with concern.

"Sorry about her. She's my cousin. I'm only wed to her through a familial arrangement made when we were children. She can be a bit much at times, but you shouldn't worry. She's harmless."

I didn't think she was as harmless as he thought, but I wasn't about to tell him that. "Uh, sure. So where are we?"

He swept his arm around in a grand gesture, encompassing all the eye could see. "This is your new home, the Queen's Residence. All the women of the royal court live here together and the children of the royals. Right now, there aren't any children, except for those belonging to the servants. But of course, I have plans to change that."

There was a strange glint in his eyes as I watched him study me curiously. I had caught the subtle hint about children, and I was sure he'd planned to make me a true bride tonight. *But I had other plans.*

He smiled at me, and my mind went blank. "Let me show you to your quarters, Roxani."

I was too stupefied to correct his misnaming this time, and if I were honest, I kind of liked the name. It sounded exotic, fancy, sexy. At least, *coming from his lips*, it did.

*How was I supposed to make it through this without touching him?*

# Chapter 7

~Roxanne~

He led me by the hand into a large building, each room more lavish than the last. My eyes took in as much as possible as we passed what looked to be bedrooms covered in the most expensive silks. There were other women in some, and I caught their eyes on me as they noticed the king rushing through the halls. Some women even tried to reach out in an attempt to draw his favor, but he saw none of them, his eyes straight forward as he dragged me onward with a purpose.

"Here we are, Roxani, your quarters." He gestured to a massive door at the end of the hallway, the ornate wood covered with carvings of gardens and nature and animals. I gasped at the lavishness of the simple entrance to what would be my temporary residence and briefly wondered if maybe I'd died in the rainstorm and just ended up in a wondrous afterlife.

*Surely this isn't real.*

I'd never known such extravagance, such financial security. The door swung open at Ochus's touch to reveal the finest of silks hanging from every wall, the colossal sleeping mat in the center littered with what seemed like hundreds of pillows and more silks. There were heavier blankets in the corner and a small fire pit in the corner with an archaic chimney system.

"Does it get cold here in winter?"

He smiled, following my gaze to the pile of furs stacked neatly along the wall. "Sometimes, yes. Snow is common here in winter, but you should stay fairly warm inside your rooms." He gestured to a door on the far wall. "Your handmaid will stay there to be available to you at all times if needed. And you will have a key to the room, so there will be only three people able to come and go without your express permission."

"Three?" I was confused for a moment, not understanding why anyone but myself would need a key.

"You, your servant, and *myself*, of course." I didn't miss the sly gleam in his eye as he peered over at me, that territorial look in his smoldering gaze again. He was like a hungry dog, and I his tender morsel, all the meat still on the bone. Footsteps echoed against the walls of the room as he stalked towards me, a lustful look in his eyes. I eyed him cautiously, hoping he wouldn't push to take this further so soon.

In a feeble attempt to derail his intent, I stretched my arms above my head, hoping he would get the hint. "I'm so exhausted after such a long travel. Maybe I should rest up, so I can start again fresh in the morning." I peeked at him from the corner of my eyes, hoping for a favorable reaction. Unfortunately, the universe saw fit to deny me the wish, laughing at me as Ochus's eyes became glued to my protruding chest. I couldn't move, frozen like a mouse before the serpent as he wrapped an arm around my tiny waist, pulling me closer.

"Are you pleased with your quarters, my new bride?"

My heart pounded in my chest as I drank up that long black hair tangling in thick curls around his stunning face. Ochus wasn't magic, but he may as well have been with the effect his body had on mine. "The room is wonderful, sir."

"I don't want you calling me sir."

I smirked, finding amusement in this name game we had started. "Would you prefer *your highness*?"

Ochus frowned, his pout making him look younger than he was. A glimpse of a child who must have always gotten his way peeked out, and I could barely restrain my laughter.

"I would not. You are to be my wife. Therefore, I demand you call me by my name."

I snapped my fingers as if I'd just remembered something important. "Oh! You mean *Arty*."

"Ye—*no*, Roxani, I do not mean that obnoxious name you gave me

in protest of your own."

"But it's a cute nickname." I mocked, my hands crossed in front of me. If I couldn't get him to take the hint, maybe I could annoy him out of my room. "Absolutely *adorable*."

His breathing was labored as he brought his nose against mine, nearly doubling over at the waist to meet my short frame. I felt those muscular arms tighten around me, one dangerously close to my ass as he growled at me in frustration.

"Dear Roxani, there is nothing about me that is *cute* or *adorable*. I am a warrior, a king, a ruler. I am fierce, strong, and unstoppable. I am a *god*."

Unable to contain myself any longer, the dam holding back my mirth broke, unleashing my slightly unhinged laughter in the vast bedroom. I collapsed onto the pile of silk pillows, his somber demeanor at war with his movie-esque words as they brought tears to my eyes. Above me, Ochus seemed less than amused.

"Do you find this *funny*? Am I a *joke* to you, Roxani?" His impressive, intimidating frame towered over me as he grabbed my arm, yanking me back to my feet. The sudden jerk hurt, bringing a new kind of tear to my eyes. I swallowed the sob in my throat at the pain, realizing I'd gone too far. My mind scrambled desperately to find the right words of apology for this dangerous man. In these times, not a single person would bat an eyelash if he decided to have me thrown from the top of the highest structure in Persepolis for my disrespect. He was the king, after all, and his word was law.

*You're not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.*

"You will *not* disrespect me, Roxani, is that clear?" His tone was sharp and final, and I flinched as his eyes narrowed threateningly. I'd seen that look in a few men's eyes before. They were usually about to hit someone, and I realized this time, it would be me.

My hands flew up to protect my face out of instinct, a knee-jerk reaction thanks to the high school boyfriend I'd had who was fond of taking out his aggression on women. I let the tears flow, knowing submission was usually what they wanted.

"I-I understand, your highness. P-please..."

I felt his hands loosen on me and his shoulders slumped, revealing a man ashamed of his actions. I stayed behind him, not daring to move. I was not familiar with this sort of dismissal from an angry man. This was a new situation for me, and I didn't know if it was safe to react.

Ochus stood before me, staring at his hands. His shoulders shook with repressed rage, and I heard his words, laced with disgust as he turned his back. "You have much to learn about life here, in the palace, Roxani. There are few men you must never speak back to, and I am one of them. I do not tolerate disrespect, and I will not tolerate your degradation of my reputation. Whether you like it or not, Roxani, you are stuck here with me. You are *mine*."



\* \* \*

### ~Artaxerxes III~

I'd had it drilled into me to demand obedience or promise death. I was a deity; all Persian rulers were. We ascended to the status of gods when we took the throne. I had never been denied anything I'd wanted in life, and no one had ever dared to mock me, not even as a child. Not even my own *mother* would dare tease me. And yet this woman before me—this quiet little songbird—loosed the bars of her cage and came out to play. I was the one at fault here, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

I had been eager to help her unleash the tiger within her, expecting her to be an obedient, tame tiger, not the witty, clever opponent she obviously was. I'd pulled her up by her arm, twisting it until she cried. *What a monster I was.* I looked down at my calloused hands, my heart steeling against these foreign emotions. *You've done worse,* I reminded myself. *A ruthless killer, an unfeeling, merciless ruler. The others learned their place quickly, and Roxani will, too.* Or she'd get hurt by more than just myself.

Roxani fell to her knees before me, holding out her hands to cradle

my own. I froze, seeing the fresh blood caking her bandages, but I held still, waiting to see what she would do. Her lips parted, a ragged sigh escaping as she held my large hands in her own. She lifted her gaze to mine, and we stared into each other's eyes for what seemed like an eternity. No words were spoken, but it was like we could understand each others' souls. I bit back a groan as she looked up at me from her position on her knees, my pants becoming uncomfortably tight as I fought the carnal attraction to this brazen filly.

"If you do not desire my presence, you have only to bid me leave, and I will obey your desires, Roxani. For now, at least."

She pursed her lips, studying my face for any indication of a lie. I called out for the guard standing outside the door to enter. When his bulky armored body lumbered into the room, I stood to face him.

"From here on out, you and your brother are on guard duty for the queen's residence. In this house, her words supersede my own, and if she orders you to remove me at any time, you are to do so, no matter what protest or demands I may offer. You are never to go against this order unless there's an emergency of some sort. Is that clear?"

The guard nodded, a shocked expression on his face as he studied me for signs of intoxication. Seeing no impairment, he made his way back out to the hallway, the door closing behind him. I turned back to Roxani, offering her a hand off the floor. She studied my hand as if it were a snake that might lash out and bite her, but she eventually placed her hand in my own, and I gently lifted her from the floor.

Leaning back, I assessed her condition, wrinkling my nose at her in jest. I hoped to dispel the somber mood that had settled over the two of us. "You would probably like to pay a visit to the bathhouses. Traveling is never comfortable, and I'm sure you'd like to unwind in the hot-spring waters." I dangled the juicy bait in front of her, hoping she would bite. "You could join me in my baths at the palace if you'd like."

"I think I'll have to take you up on your offer another day, *sir*."



I chuckled, realizing the nickname wouldn't be so bad to put up with if it made my little songbird smile. *Anything for her.* "You can call me Arty if you'd like. And the invitation of my company in the baths is always open for you, Roxani."

I turned, hearing voices in the hallway. "I believe your servant girl is back. Hopefully, they had no trouble."

The knock on the door was brief, and I looked at Roxani, expecting her to permit them to enter, but she simply stared at the door, a confused expression on her face.

"Enter," I called out, frowning at my timid tiger. "You live here, so it may be a good idea if the guards get used to you giving orders, you know."

She nodded back at me, her eyes flicking nervously over to her young friend. I cleared my throat, looking over at the confused expression of the slave girl.

"Did you have any issues?"

Layla shook her head, a small smile on her lips. "When they saw the guard, they didn't bother putting up a fight. They're bringing everything in now."

"I'll take my leave and let you girls get settled in. Someone should send for you when the evening meal is served. I will be announcing you as my wife after the banquet, so dress nice. If you don't have anything suitable to wear, let one of the guards know, and they can call for the dressmaker. Wear something bright, Roxani."

He nodded to Layla on the way out, leaving me standing there in stunned silence. I couldn't make heads or tails of this Persian king, and he both frightened and excited me at the same time. I still wanted nothing more than to go home to my family, but I knew there was no guarantee I would ever get back. If I wanted any sort of life, I might have to live the one I'd been catapulted into.

Layla moved to stand beside me as the guards carried in several trunks and a handful of small chests. *This was all mine? They must have paid the guards handsomely to overlook my unwilling state.* That is, if whatever happened to me actually happened at all. How could I be sure what was real and what was an alternate reality?

*This was getting confusing as hell.*

"Hey, are you alright? He didn't do anything shady, did he?" Layla checked me over for any injuries or signs of being roughed up. I shrugged, looking at her sadly.

"No, I'm fine. But I have no idea what I'm doing."

"I'm glad you asked for me. I didn't want to work with the other girls, and I really like you. This is more than I expected, honestly. And I didn't want you to be alone."

I realized how glad I was for this one friend I had in a world so far from my own. My arms reached out to wrap her in a bear hug, shoulders heavy with the weight of stress from today.

"I am grateful that he gave you to me so that I have someone in my corner. I can never thank you enough for all you've done for me; I want you to know that, Layla."

She laughed nervously as she pulled back from my obviously emotional ass. "It's no big deal. After all, you're the first person to treat me as an equal this whole time. And I really like you, Roxanne."

I sighed, deciding to embrace my new life for the time being. "According to the king, it's Roxani now."

Layla raised an eyebrow, chuckling under her breath. "How do you feel about that?"

I shrugged, realizing I sort of liked the feel of it on my tongue. I *really* liked it when it came out of *his* mouth. A little shiver ran down my spine as my mind conjured images of two bodies in the dark, writhing around in ecstasy among the silks--

*Stop that. You can't get caught up in another world—eyes on the prize.*

*Survive, adapt.*

*Find your way home.*

# Chapter 8

~Roxanne~

After sorting through the luggage I'd apparently been shipped out with, it became clear I was wearing what used to be my best dress. Unfortunately, this would not be adequate for dinner with a king, so Layla was off to gather the seamstress. The emptiness of the strange place echoed around me, reminding me I was alone. Surely it couldn't hurt to roam and explore while I waited for her to come back. When I peeked my head out of the room, the guard turned, eyeing me curiously. My throat was dry, hands clammy as I straightened my filthy toga and tried to dust it off. Not that it helped in the least, but *still*.

"Is there something I can do for you, ma'am?" His voice was deep, his size intimidating, but I wasn't going to get anywhere being afraid of all these guards and warriors. This was ancient Persia. There were warriors everywhere. *Better get used to it.*

"Maybe there is. Would you be able to show me around the residence so I can learn to navigate it on my own?"

He chuckled at my eagerness as if my interest in my own home was odd. "Miss, I don't think it's wise to leave my post in front of your door, but I'm sure we can find someone to show you around." He scratched at the stubble of his beard, thoughtfully gazing off into the distance before snapping his fingers in sudden realization.

"I've got it! I'll have the eunuch come to show you around. He's nice enough, and he's been here for a while." He turned to look back down the hallway, shouting at the top of his lungs with his hands cupped around his mouth. "*Bagoas!*"

Around the corner strolled a young man, probably of about twenty, his black hair and tanned skin making him look exotic. Draped across his defined hipbones was a Roman-style skirt, and a shawl hung limply over his shoulders. This Bagoas was easy on the eyes,

for sure, but I knew what the word *eunuch* meant. The raven-haired man looked up, his braids swaying from the ponytail he'd tied it up in atop his head.

"You rang, Thipides?"

The guard called Thipides smiled, gesturing the young man towards him. "I have a job for you."

Bagoas looked over at me, finally noticing my presence beside the burly guard. "Who is this? One of Ochus's concubines, courtesy of his prostrating uncle in Susa?"

Thipides turned red at Bagoas's assumption, gesturing to the door he stood guard at. His glare towards the young man relayed his blatant frustration. "You should watch your tongue. This is the king's new bride, and he seems quite taken with her already."

Bagoas gasped, his eyes wide. "Oh, Atossa will *not* like this." He glanced over at me, eyeing me up and down carefully before offering me a bright smile. "But I don't like that raging bitch anyway. Welcome to the Queen's Residence, your grace. I am Bagoas, the resident servant and eunuch."

I reached out to shake his hand, forgetting there was probably some level of custom that dictated how I should act around people here and how statuses worked. For a brief second, I held my breath, unwilling to abandon the handshake but afraid it offered offense to the man or the king's image. But Bagoas took it eagerly in his own, beaming from ear to ear.

"What is your name, if I may be so bold?"

I stuttered a reply, forgetting for a second who I was. "I'm Roxanne—I mean, *Roxani*, to hear that pushy man tell it. A pleasure to meet you, Bagoas."

He took in my appearance, which was honestly a fright, but he was diplomatic about it, taking my hand to lead me away from my new room. Thipides waved as we made our way down the halls.

"So, why don't I give you a tour? And you look like you could use a nice hot bath and a change of clothes. They must have been terrible traveling partners, the guards. They don't care if they stink of piss

and sweat all day, every day for a week or more. Those of us with higher standards appreciate cleanliness. Do you have clothing of your own?"

His questions fired off one after another, taking my brain for a spin. I tried to answer him as best as I could. "I'd love a tour and a bath. Unfortunately, none of my old wardrobe is fitting for polite society at the moment, and my handmaid has gone in search of the dressmaker."

"Hopefully, she comes back with Ricine; she is the absolute *best* at what she does." He stopped at the doors of the house, and I practically slammed into his back because my mind was wandering.

*To the king.*

If I was being honest with myself, I couldn't *stop* thinking about him. Ochus—Arty—was on my mind from the moment I'd first seen him. He had an air about him that reeked of power and strength, and he commanded every room he entered. Even the way he carried himself was regal, as if nothing could touch him. *I wanted to push all of his arrogant buttons. Poke the bear.* I had no sense of self-preservation.

"What happened?" I tried to peer around his shoulders, but he was too tall, the guard blocking out everything Bagoas didn't. I could hear a voice I recognized—Layla—and one I hadn't heard before.

"I don't care if the king himself ordered me to, I'm not dressing that *bitch* Atossa—"

"It's not Atossa. I serve Roxani, a new bride of the king. And I'm sure the king will see to it you're rewarded handsomely."

The older voice didn't reply, but I heard her muttering to herself. They must be close. I shoved my hand between the guard and Bagoas' shoulders and pressed them apart, revealing Layla leading an older woman with grey hair and a walking stick towards the door. They were only about ten feet from me, and Layla spotted me between the two men, pointing my way.

"This is the woman I was telling you about. Roxani of Athens. The new bride of Artaxerxes the third, king of Persia. *Now*, will you help me?"

The older woman noticed Bagoas standing next to me, and her eyes lit up, arms swinging wide as she called to him. "Bagoas, lad, how *are* you?"

Bagoas embraced the woman, laughing. "Ricine, you old harpy, how are you today?"

"I'm wonderful, love. What are you up to?"

Bagoas cleared his throat, a hand remaining on Ricine's shoulder. "I'm showing around my new friend, Roxani. She's the newest addition to the king's harem, and she requires a wardrobe fit for royalty. Maybe you could help?"

"For you, Bagoas? Anything! Let's get you over to my workshop, and we can get her fitted and altered." Ricine eyed me over his shoulder as if I were an intriguing specimen in a petri dish. "Do you have any clothes at all?"

I shrugged, not really knowing how to answer that. "Honestly, I do, but they're all pretty bland."

Ricine clapped her hands together as she marched off the way she'd come from, not waiting for us to follow. "Have one of the guards gather your wardrobe, and we can see about modifying what you have to make it suitable for the palace life. And then we can start working on a queen's wardrobe for you."

Bagoas drug me behind him, Layla hot on my heels. I heard her shout out orders to a guard nearby as I realized how grateful I was for her help. I had no idea what was going on, but Layla had been in this time for her whole life. She understood how life worked here. *I* was barely navigating the simplest of tasks.

Before I'd had time to take a look around me, we were at a small shop at the end of a quiet street. The storefront was unassuming, but Ricine's work was standing in the nearby archways, and I had to admit, her clothing was absolutely gorgeous.

"She does good work," I muttered, reaching a hand up to rub the soft silk between two fingers, admiring the wonderful stitchwork and pure fabric.

Bagoas smiled over at me as we walked through the main entryway,

passing by even more clothes of all colors and designs. Yards and yards of material flowed from the walls, and jewels of every color adorned quite a few pieces. I could only stare in slack-jawed awe at the sheer enormity of extravagance. I'd never owned a silk blouse or a soft pair of shoes--it had always been hard on my mom's pocketbook growing up, raising two children. To be faced now with a complete lifestyle upgrade was a shock to my system.

"So! Why don't we start with the basics!" Ricine strode out from behind a curtain, her dress flowing around her feet in gentle waves as she carried an armful of colorful silks over to a nearby table. She gestured for me to approach, and with a gentle shove from Bagoas, I made my way to the seamstress.

What seemed like hours later, I emerged from her workshop with two more chests than I went in with. Ricine had managed to work her magic on the gowns and clothing I'd brought with me, turning it into appropriate palace attire, and she's fitted me specifically for some more 'exotic' clothes, fashioned from the latest in Egypt and Greece. I just missed my cutoff jean shorts and racerback tanks, my converse sneakers, and baseball caps. Inconspicuous, low maintenance. This Persian attire was lavish, extravagant, and glittery.

I had no idea how to act wearing such finery.

Bagoas walked beside me, leading the way back to the Queens Residence Compound. We hadn't even had time to go on our little tour, and I hoped he hadn't forgotten. Hopefully, there would still be time.

"So, where would you like to see first, Roxani? Do you prefer to be called by your name or by something else?"

"I just like Roxani, thanks. I mean, unless there's some term you should refer to the king's wives by. I'm afraid I'm pretty unfamiliar with your customs, and I don't want to offend." What was it with having so many titles and names that fascinated the ancient civilizations? My feet suddenly interested me to no end, and I stared down at them as I followed Bagoas's own next to mine, trusting he wouldn't lead me into a wall. I felt numb, like this still wasn't really happening, and I would just wake up and be back in my own bed.

Bagoas stopped at a large building built into the mountainside that butted up against the back of the compound. "This is the baths, Roxani. The waters are straight off the mountains, pure and untouched. You can have a hot soak, too, if that's more your speed. You just have to ask an attendant to add warming rocks around the pit."

I frowned, realizing there wouldn't be running water as I knew it. No shower to beat molten lava down onto my back as I leaned against the wall of a shower, letting the stress of another day melt away. The little things I'd always taken for granted, even as someone who grew up poor, hurt more than they had a right to, now that I'd lost them.

Bagoas didn't seem to notice my state of sudden depression as he led me past a few smaller buildings. "These are the servant quarters. Aside from your handmaid, if you need anything in your daily life, you can find someone here to do the job." He turned to his left and gestured to a large verandah adorned with many hanging silks and beads. In the center of the space was a gathering of women, dancing around as two older women sat on the floor, one with a drum and another with what looked like a very early ancestor to the guitar. A third woman danced around while playing a—

*Is that a recorder? Lord help me.*

"Ah, I see you've spotted the gathering. We have a lot of fun here, all hours of the day and night. If you like music, dancing, or drinking, then we have something for you." He scrunched up his nose as he took in the smells coming from the next building. "And that's the kitchens, but it smells like they're processing meat right now, so we'd better head along and get on to the next part of the tour!"

He showed me the dining area where everyone gathered to share meals, the laundry area, the library—which was full of scrolls—and finally, the gardens.

The gardens were spectacular, the flowering plants all bursting with vibrant blooms. The scent of such a large variety of flowers was heady, almost intoxicating. Lingered beneath it was the familiar scent of rich soil mixed in with something I couldn't place.



Something foreign.

"It's beautiful. How did they ever get all these beautiful plants all in one place?"

Bagoas chuckled, ruffling my hair good-naturedly. I noticed he was an easygoing guy, and with every passing minute, I became more comfortable with him.

"Ah, I'm not quite sure, but I'm told they made Greek captives build it and transported plants from all over the empire. The last queen loved her flowers."

I frowned, running my hands along the wall of the garden enclosure. "The last queen. Ochus's mother?"

Bagoas nodded. "Are you ready to head back to the baths?" I can have your servant girl bring you the garments Ricine made for you for tonight."

I'd explained to Bagoas that the king had demanded my presence at a banquet tonight of some sort, and he'd *insisted* that Ricine make a special outfit just for dinner. He must know more about what's going on around here than most, I suppose, so I deferred to his judgment. I hadn't even seen the garment yet, and I was kind of curious to see what they'd picked out for me.

I'd always had a thing for ancient clothing styles. Something about the way women's bodies weren't made to hide behind religious garb, how they embraced their bodies and were comfortable in their skin, struck a chord in me and made me feel confident in myself. I'd never been one to wear racy things, but the women in ancient Persia and Egypt and Greece all had no shame in dressing for comfort or practicality over modesty.

And if I wanted to fit in, I'd have to dress the part, as well as act it.

It appeared this era wasn't going to give me a choice whether to participate or not, but I wouldn't go down without a fight.

"Sure, lead the way, Bagoas. I could use a hot soak. And maybe some salve for these wrists, if you can."

We chatted about the little things as he led me to the baths, where Layla was waiting with a smile on her face and flowers in her

hands.

# Chapter 9

~Roxanne~

The baths had been conveniently vacated as the rest of the women prepared for the festivities tonight. I stepped into the large, echoing stone room, where a square pool of water sat sequestered in the back of the room. It honestly reminded me of a large lap pool, with water flowing at a slow pace from one end to the other. Obviously, filters didn't exist yet, so there had to be some way of making sure the water cycled. Unfortunately, I hadn't paid much attention to our guest speaker when they'd had the lecture on ancient civilizations and running water indoors.

Now I wish I'd been more attentive in class. It would have saved me a lot of trouble, considering my current predicament.

I heard feet on the stone slabs behind me, and I turned to see Layla approaching with some different swatches of fabric. Assuming they were going to be what I towed off with, I shrugged out of the filthy toga I wore, happy to have a bath, a *real bath*, not just a dip to rinse off some surface dirt in the river. I didn't have nudity hangups like most people because I'd been in sports growing up. Plenty of times, I'd been just another naked girl in the locker rooms, and in college, I was just another naked woman in the same situation, only more filled out for a change.

I was fit and nothing to sneeze at, but I wasn't without my flaws. I briefly wondered if I still had the tattoo covering my spine that I'd gotten after my first year in college. My suspicions were confirmed when I heard Layla gasp behind me.

"What is that? A tattoo?" Her eyes were glued to the intricate design I'd decided on in a drunken stupor. I shrugged, hoping tattoos were a thing in this time.

"Yeah, it's a tattoo. Got it to commemorate my womanhood." I couldn't see the ink, but I remembered the design well.

We'd just finished finals our freshman year, and I'd lost my boyfriend the month before that to a drunk driving accident. I'd been a mess, and he'd been my first true love, so it was a miracle that I'd been able to slug my way through the finals exams and actually *pass*. When he'd first asked me out, he'd given me a picture that was slapped together in a 30min lunch break on the back of an extra napkin from the food court. The mermaid he'd drawn was beautiful yet haunting, her eyes holding so much unknown, yet seeming so familiar. They drew you in until you noticed her webbed fingers and her sharp teeth, the bits of seaweed dangling from knots in her wet hair. She was exactly as I'd described her during open poetry reads in our Creative Writing class, the only one I shared with him. He'd been paying attention, and he'd found an excellent way to show it. He'd brought my creation to life, and I'd known then and there we were destined to be together.

When he died, I swore to my roommate that I wanted to remember him forever, and I had pulled the old napkin off the wall where it had hung since I'd gotten it. We'd made a beeline to the nearest tattoo parlor with good ratings, and I spent half the evening crying over the love I'd lost and the pain from the needle. The mermaid took up half my back when all was said and done, and I'd spent the money I'd saved up to go on vacation to have it done in color. Her skin was a tinted blue, and her eyes were pitch black, a void very much like my soul was when I wrote her into existence.

If I flexed my shoulders, her hair would wave--

"Roxanne! Where is your head right now?"

I shook my head as Layla snapped her fingers in front of my face, the memory fading as if I hadn't just relived that whole emotional rollercoaster. "Sorry," I grumbled. "It's got some sad memories tied to it, is all."

Layla shook her head as she sat down on the edge of the bath, her toes edging towards the hot spring water. "It's usually a symbol of the ultimate status in our city-states when someone noble possesses a tattoo. And to have one this insanely detailed, this *intense*, it's something I might see on a priestess's body, but not this magnificent. Whoever did this was a true artist."

I choked back a tear at the brief pang of survivor's guilt. I'd walked away from the accident, but the beautiful artist that had breathed life in my words had not been so lucky. "Yes, he really was."

Layla seemed to realize I didn't want to talk about it, so she let the subject drop, picking my toga up as she made her way to the far wall. I saw her grab a small bottle of what I figured was perfume and head back over to retake a seat, watching me. Suddenly I felt self-conscious, turning away from her as I hurried into the steaming water. The level of scalding heat was surprisingly close to the temperature of my at-home baths, and I got to work sloughing off the flakes of dirt from the long trip. I soaked my hair, thankful that my natural oils needed no conditioner to keep them smooth, and I wondered if lye soap was a thing yet or not. I knew a little about making soaps thanks to my second roommate in college, and I wondered if I could make something similar here for myself.

"So, Layla. Have you seen the dress they put together for me for tonight?"

I didn't bother to turn around as I heard her clear her throat. I wished I could just be alone for a few moments, but I doubted Layla would be leaving anytime soon. "I've peeked at it, miss, but I haven't seen it laid out or anything like that. I won't actually see it until it's on you. Bagoas is waiting in your chambers to help me with your hair. He said he had some jewelry for you to wear."

I shook my head, hoping that my whole life wasn't going to be just gift after gift, locked up in this harem at the beck and call of a horny king and his political friends.

"Where is he getting such lavish gifts?"

Layla chuckled, a light, melodious sound that I didn't think I'd heard during our travels. "I'm sure they're from the king. It makes sense for him to send you gifts as his new bride."

I rolled my eyes into the back of my head. *I'd almost forgotten I was the new bride to the king.* The painful realization dropped me right square on my ass into reality, and I groaned, hoping I wouldn't be asked to *consummate the marriage* on night one.

*I really shouldn't be messing with time like this.*



\* \* \*

~Artaxerxes III~

When the guard came to fetch me, I had already taken my place on the throne, awaiting news of Roxani's arrival. I expected her to be punctual and on time, the epitome of a great ruler's other half. The yin to my yang. My balance. And here she was, *late*.

*Not a good start for my new bride.*

"Sir!" The guard by the door flagged me down, his steps faltering as he hesitated by the far wall.

I sighed as I waved at him to approach. "What is it, guardsman?"

"Bagoas sends his apologies but says your bride will be down shortly."

"This is *ridiculous!*" I shouted, slamming my fist down on the arm of my throne. The wood cracked slightly under the force of my attack, and I sheepishly relaxed my fist, not realizing my own strength. An embarrassing loss of control and composure for one who was supposed to be a deity, a leader, a *king*.

"If she is not down here very, *very* soon, I will march up there myself and rip whatever's left under that loincloth he wears off of his pretentious body--"

"What a nice way to greet your *old friend*, Ochus."

Bagoas leaned against a marble pillar to my left, a smirk on his face that I was very familiar with. He was up to no good, and I didn't know whether I would be the ass in his elaborate ruse or if I would enjoy the show. There was usually an exciting outcome whenever he was up to mischief, and I always enjoyed his little displays of merriment.

"What brings you down to the throne without my bride, old friend?" I cocked an eyebrow at the eunuch, my eyes trailing lazily over his

muscled forearms. He'd been an excellent choice to keep the women safe, and he was unsuspecting as well, which made him less of a target. The women trusted him, and I needed them to have someone they could go to without being intimidated. In secret, Bagoas was as close to an advisor as I had. He'd saved me on more than one occasion, sometimes from the women, sometimes from worse.

"I think you will like what I've managed to do with your lovely little bride, Ochus. I had Ricine dress her in the finest silks and fabrics money could buy. *Your money*, of course."

He waved his hand to the side and a guard nodded before disappearing around a curtain. I realized the time was upon me to announce her to the people gathered here. I turned to the crowd of people milling about in the Apadana, calling for their attention. When a hush had fallen over the last person, I spoke to them, my voice carrying across every head from my raised platform.

"Thank you for all coming to the celebration tonight! As you have all suspected, I did decide to keep a new bride from my uncle's wonderful bounty of gifts he sent from Susa. I want to introduce you all to my new bride, Roxani of Persia!"

She stepped into view and stole the breath from my very lungs; she was captivating. Ricine being who she was, I had expected a sheer Egyptian-style casing, something that left nothing to the imagination. After all, she'd dressed several of my wives and concubines before, but none of them had ever looked as regal or as entrancing as my Roxani.

Her white silk dress hung off her right shoulder, adorned with silver bands of shiny material that reflected the light when she moved. I suspected Ricine had sewn jewels into the bodice, but I couldn't tell from this distance. Roxani looked unsure of herself as she took her first few steps in, led by Bagoas on her side. When our eyes connected, I saw her spine straighten, and her gait fill with confidence.

That chin of hers was tilted ever so slightly, her eyes changed from the panicked doe I'd seen in her room hours ago. I couldn't breathe as she sauntered over to my side, her leg peeking out of the high slit on either side of her gown as she finally reached out to take my

offered hand. When her fingers wrapped around my own, I gasped in relief, pleased to have this beauty right here at my side. One glance around the room assured me I was the envy of every man there, and I cleared my throat to offer up a toast to the woman who had been on my mind since she'd practically fallen at my feet this afternoon.

"To my new bride—"

"She's not *fit* to hold the title. *She* is an outsider, and the more strays you bring in, the more unfair it becomes to your current wives. I won't stand by while I'm disrespected—"

Atossa huffed and puffed as she trotted down the aisle in a sheer Egyptian shift, tied loosely together below her breasts. To the untrained eye, one might mistake her for an ordinary concubine, but unfortunately, she was my cousin, and I hadn't been able to protest an arranged marriage as a child. Moreover, I'd never known her in the bedroom, and I had *no intention* ever to do so.

*A man had to have his standards.*

"Now, what's the meaning of this rude intrusion, Atossa? You dare disrespect your king in front of his guests and subjects?"

Atossa bowed at my words, sending a scathing glance at the woman at my side. Roxani didn't flinch to her credit, drawing up to her full height and placing a hand calmly on my forearm. I felt my body react to her, a fact which didn't go unnoticed by the angry woman before me.

"I would never dare disrespect you, *my king*," she whined. Her hands rested on her hips as she stared daggers at Roxani. "I only mean to prevent a new arrival from claiming what is rightfully mine—"

"And who decided that position is rightfully yours, dear cousin?" I smirked at her, and her sly grin fell, doubting herself for once. *Good, It's about time she stops acting like she's in charge. The woman is insufferable.*

"Well, it's destined, your highness. It is what our fathers planned when they arranged—"

"My father isn't here to tell me what to do, and I won't be ordered



around by a woman. I'll choose my queen; now you can either get it out of your head that you run this empire, or you can leave my palace."

Atossa gritted her teeth as she turned to Roxani, her face a twitching mess of anger and rage. She was seething, but she put on a good act. I knew I would have to make sure Roxani was well-guarded until Atossa got over herself. The woman could be toxic at times, and I would take no chances.

"Forgive my outburst, your highness. My congratulations to you and your new *wife*."

Roxani bowed her head towards Atossa, a soft smile on her face. I had expected her to lash out after my talk about speaking up. After all, most women were catty, mean creatures who only strived for two things--money and power. Instead, I was left slack-jawed as she simply smiled, her hand extended to shake Atossa's. I watched as my cousin reluctantly took my new wife's hand, shaking it briefly before dropping the contact to retreat into the crowd.

"Well done, Roxani," I muttered against her ear, pulling her against my side. I loved the way her body felt against mine, and I knew it was only a matter of time before I had her in my bed. Unfortunately, the thought of peeling this stunning gown off her equally gorgeous body had me unfit for polite company. I quickly sat on my throne, pulling the unsuspecting Roxani into my lap. Her blush and wide doe eyes were confirmation that she knew exactly how she affected me. "You will sit here until the greetings and congratulations are finished. If you move, I'm going to embarrass us both, do you understand, woman?"

I had brushed her hair back from her neck to whisper in her ear, and goosebumps broke out across her skin as my breath caressed her tender flesh. She let out a low whimper, her bottom squirming deliciously in my lap as she fidgeted impatiently. Those lovely cheeks of hers turned a delicious shade of red, embarrassment building as she felt my growing manhood against her thighs. The urge to be closer to her was irritating in its intensity as I shifted slightly forward to bring us cheek to cheek.

"Do you understand, Roxani?" I repeated, quickly losing my

patience. At her brief nod, I smiled, sitting back. I liked a tigress, but I also appreciated a well-behaved woman in public. She would make a fine queen as she grew into her new status.

Dinner couldn't come soon enough, and then I could acceptably whisk my bride off to her chambers--or my own if I would be so bold. She would be mine for the night, and I could truly appreciate the best gift my uncle could have given me.

*Her.*

# Chapter 10

~Roxanne~

*If this man thinks he's getting me into his bed tonight, he's hallucinating,* I mused, reaffirming my decision to remain unavailable to the king until I could try to return home. I needed time to sort this all out. I just had to hope the king was a man of honor and wouldn't force me to fold. *Not that it would take much force at this point.*

I didn't have high hopes, but it was all I had left. I clung to that little ray of hope like it was a life preserver, and I, a drowning woman in the ocean. I clung a little tighter when I felt his very obvious erection pressing into the back of my thighs. I'd not had the best luck with men in my life, but I was no blushing virgin. I knew what pressed into my skin, I knew what was on his mind, and I knew I was eager to indulge with him. *Very eager.* But I couldn't risk it and ruin my chances of ever seeing my home again.

I sat still until the bell sounded for dinner, rising only when Artaxerxes motioned for me to stand. He'd fed me while I lounged on his lap, unable to move even if he'd given the command. Feeling compelled to obey him must come with the territory, but that would be a habit I would break quickly. In the corner of the room, I'd noticed Atossa flirting shamelessly with another man. Her blatant lack of respect for her husband and king sitting not twenty feet from her was apparent for everyone to see. I felt embarrassed for the king, knowing it probably looked terrible to have such a wanton wife and cousin.

I watched his eyes dart over to her, perched in the lap of another man, simply shaking his head before he turned away to holler across the room. I was unsure whether to follow or stay by the throne, but the decision was made for me as Ochus grabbed my hand, pulling me behind him like a pup on a leash.

I smiled and nodded through what felt like a hundred or more introductions, remembering about five people in all. I was never

good with names, and information overloads never sat well with my brain. Finally, the time came where the king looked ready to make his exit, standing to address the room. I watched as he put two fingers between those lips of his, screaming out a whistle that instantly brought the room to a hushed quiet.

*Impressive. His entire being commands respect and attention.*

"I would like to thank you all for coming tonight to celebrate the gifts my uncle has sent, plentiful and gorgeous all around. But even he couldn't have known he was sending me such a beautiful wife. I expect you all to party on and make merry in my absence as I enjoy her presence in a more *private* setting." He cast his eyes over to me as some male hoots and whistles carried over the low laughter. The gaze he set upon me was enough to light me on fire, and I felt my body begin to thrum in response. I arched my back, standing tall as he showed me off to the room, trying my best to seem regal and untouchable. I wanted no issues with his people, but I hadn't the slightest idea how I was supposed to act.

Ochus embraced me--or so I thought--before I felt myself lifting off the ground, bent over his shoulder at the waist, my ass in the air. He gave it a playful *smack* as he walked out the back entrance to the great hall, two guards following in our wake as he balanced my flailing form carefully on his left side. Beating him in the back with my pathetic fists, I bitched at his mistreatment the whole way to our destination.

"I don't know who the *hell* you think you are, but I demand you put me down this *instant*. I can walk just fine, *thank you*."

I couldn't see his smirk, but I knew it was there by the tone in his voice. "I think I rather like you like this, with your ass at eye level, prime for punishment."

*Punish me*, I begged in my head. *I dare you*.

He didn't seem like the type to make a scene, and I didn't want to press it. Like it or not, I only had a few friends in this time, and he was one of them. Not many people here had spare kindness to offer. This was a warrior's country, and these men were brutal. The women were even worse.

"I'm nauseous hanging over your back like this. All I see is the ground, and you're killing my stomach." When no answer was forthcoming, I switched gears. "Can you let me walk? I promise to keep up. This is a hella uncomfortable position to be in."

The king stopped, setting me on my feet before I had a chance to catch my breath. I was overcome with a wave of dizziness, listing to the side as I tried to steady myself. Ochus reached out to steady me, his hands curling protectively around my shoulders.

"I thought you said you could walk?" The frown on his face betrayed his evident frustration.

"I, uh, I just was a little woozy, I guess. I just need a second. I've been upside down for too long." I put my hand out to steady myself, holding onto his shoulder like a lifeline.

His impatience got the better of him, and he picked me up in his arms, carrying me in front of him this time in those solid and muscular biceps. "I don't have time to waste. I will be leaving on a campaign soon and I plan to enjoy my time with you before I go."

*Oh great, his plans definitely haven't changed.* Knowing I needed to derail his train of thought before we got back to my room, my brain fumbled around for any complaint that would be off-putting enough to dissuade this stubborn man without getting me killed. As we passed Atossa's rooms, I happened to catch a glimpse of a man with her, wearing garb that didn't look identical to the guards that wandered around the compound. *That woman is a snake and nothing but trouble*, my mother would have said. Snakes are dangerous in tall grass. And this was a jungle compared to what I was used to. History told me to be very careful around her.

I smiled as Ochus set me down in the pile of pillows that made up my bedding beneath the vast windows that stretched half the length of the wall. I didn't bother glancing outside at the tall mountains, having seen enough of them on my way into town as a prisoner. And irony of ironies, here I was again, a prisoner of a different sort this time—a captive to my savior.

*A captive of time.*



\* \* \*

~Artaxerxes III~

She sat there atop her pillows and silks, her hands in her lap as she watched me move to close the door behind us. Setting the lock firmly in place, I turned back to my new queen, laying out my plan of action in my head.

"You have been sent to me by the mighty deity Mithra, through my uncle as a vessel, and I am thankful for his gift."

Her eyes went wide before she shook with uncontrollable laughter. Was something I'd said funny? I felt my lips pull down into a frown, my brows furrowed as I struggled to figure her out.

"You seriously think the gods brought me to you? I think they pulled the wrong number, sir, because I am nothing special. I am a simple, weak woman who is far from home and probably will never get back to her own time--"

"What do you mean, your own time?" I'd caught the nervous twitch as I repeated her words back to her, the way her brain seemed to be flying a million miles an hour behind those beautiful eyes of hers. "I'm all ears, beautiful."

She squirmed uncomfortably as I stood before her, arms crossed in front of my chest. Her cunning eyes stared back into my own, and I realized I would never get tired of looking into them.

"I meant my own home, that's all. Got the words mixed up." She glanced at the door, then back to me, an uneasy look in her eyes. "I appreciated dinner this evening. I hope you liked the dress that Ricine made--"

I fell to my knees in the pile of silks, reaching out a hand to caress her arm. "I always like the dresses Ricine makes, but this one is certainly befitting a *queen*." My fingers followed the line of silver fabric just below her breasts, and I smiled at her sharp inhale,

pleased to affect her as she affected me. "This fabric here shines in the light. I must have Ricine make more dresses for you in this fabric. You should always shimmer like a polished gem. It draws the eye."

Roxani glanced down at her lap, her breathing a bit uneven and rapid. "I don't particularly enjoy being the center of attention. Drawing too many eyes only invites trouble. Best to stay barely noticeable, where I'm from."

I stopped my slow torture on her ribcage, pulling her hands into my lap as I ran my thumbs over her soft knuckles. *There probably wasn't a single rough spot of skin on this woman's body.*

"In my cities, in my lands, wherever my name strikes fear, you shall fear no man, woman, or child. I will let no harm come to you ever, for you are more valuable to me than my own life."

Her nervous laugh was endearing, just like the way she tucked her mahogany curls behind her ear. "While I do appreciate the thought, sir, there's no need for flattery. Surely a king is more valuable to his people than his wives?"

I shook my head, frustrated at her ignorance. "My people will value you as they do me. After all, you will give me my heirs, and that is a promise of a bright future for my empire."

The look on Roxani's face was priceless as she stared blankly at me from her kneeling position before me. "I'm sorry, did you just say *give you heirs?*"



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

*I couldn't believe what my ears were hearing.* His face was stoically blank as he stared at me like I was hard of hearing. "Yes, Roxani, my wives provide for my line. The Achaemenid Empire. You will

birth me royal offspring someday. It is the highest honor to be the mother of the future king--"

"Hold. Up." I threw my hands in the air like big ole' stop signs, needing him to freeze and rewind that back. My brain was incapable of wrapping itself around all of his words as a whole. It was already hard enough not to jump his bones because I might alter the timeline, and now he was talking about giving him an heir.

*I never wanted to be a mom.*

*Life was too hard.*

*But here...here I could be free of worry about how I would afford to raise one.* "You want me to give you children?"

The eagerness crept back into his eyes as he stared at me, his gaze trailing up and down my body. "I do, and I plan to start the job right now, Roxani." He reached out to grab me, but I couldn't stop my body from flinching backward, putting space between us. His lustful gaze turned to confusion at my actions. "Is there something wrong, my little songbird? You did not recoil from my touch earlier."

I hung my head, covering my face with my hands as I hid from the extreme challenge before me.

"I'm not ready for this yet, your highness. Please, I'd rather—I just can't."

His eyes narrowed in a thinly veiled attempt to hide his anger. Likely that he'd never been refused before. As a king, there probably weren't many people willing to take the chance of losing their lives for crossing this powerful man. *But I just had. And now, I would probably suffer the consequences.*

My whole body shook in fear—and something else I wasn't ready to investigate too closely—as he leaned over me, forcing me to my back among the silks and pillows. His tongue darted out to lick the crease of his lips as he eyed my body like the most delicious of desserts. I felt warmth spread between my thighs as I fought my primal reaction to this handsome, powerful, *dangerous man* towering over me right now.



"You would deny your king? It's simply not done this way. You are mine, my property. Your body cannot lie, and it tells me the truth your lying mouth refuses to." His hands were on my body in an instant, tugging at the fabric of my skirt to part the obscenely high slit Ricine had put in it. I held extremely still beneath him as his hand trailed to my thigh, sending a tingling shockwave of white-hot electricity straight to my core.

I couldn't speak, but if he kept touching me, I'd be making other noises. *Plenty of loud ones, too.*

"You see, Roxani," he murmured as his hand dipped between my thighs, zeroing in on my already-slick folds with deadly accuracy, "you are my property, and as my property, I will do whatever I please with you. And if I so desire to thrust myself deep inside you until I see stars, you will spread these legs and give me what I demand." His finger dipped inside me, and I let out a squeak, my body writhing beneath his as he worked me with first one finger, then two. *Why did he have to be so good at it? Where was my resolve?*

*What about the timeline?*

"NO!" I realized the second I shouted it that I'd signed my death sentence, but I couldn't bring myself to care. I needed to stop this before we went too far. *Before I fucked up the rest of human life as we knew it.*

*It was tough being a woman sometimes.*

His agile fingers stopped inside me, but he didn't pull them out of my slick center. I felt myself throbbing around those digits, those excellent instruments of pleasure, as his eyes rose to meet mine. His face was covered in a scowl, and there was barely-repressed rage behind those gorgeous eyes of his.

"No?" He questioned as he thrust his fingers deeper inside me, pulling them almost completely out before caressing me from the inside again. There was no biting back the moan of pleasure as he finger-fucked me, not *entirely* against my will.

"I do not consent to be your plaything tonight." I stared him straight in the eyes, hoping he couldn't see my resolve weakening. I felt his fingers withdraw from my core, dragging my juices along my thigh

and out from beneath my skirt as he brought those sinfully slick fingers to his mouth, licking every drop from them before sliding lower in the pillows, his head coming dead even with my waist.

"I did not ask for your consent, Roxani. I do not *need* it. I am a *king*. You cannot deny me."

His hands balled my skirt up in one quick motion, baring my whole downstairs to his intense gaze. *This is wrong. He can't do this.*

*But he can. We aren't in Kansas, and I'm not Dorothy. This is Ancient Persia, and women don't refuse a king, or they get killed.*

When his lips rested against my mound, my body lit on fire. As if he'd spoken some magical word against my thighs, they spread to afford him better access to my eager, throbbing pussy.

*King of Persia, hah. More like Master of Pussies.*

I could do nothing as his tongue explored me, a lone tear trailing down my cheek as I felt it slide between my folds to move inside me, tasting me. Devouring me. *Eating me alive.*

"You cannot deny you want me, Roxani. Your body betrays you." I felt him move to climb above me, yanking me into a sitting position to pull the dress from my body and bare me entirely to his gaze. I felt my arms reflexively move to cover my chest, but it was a futile gesture. His hands reached out to remove them, pulling them to my side as another tear threatened to spill over.

I said nothing as he turned me over, my face buried in the silks as his hand caressed my backside. When I felt the sharp sting of his hand against my soft skin, I bit back a yelp, determined to deny him the satisfaction from my pain.

"Come, not, tigress. No fight? No resistance?" I remained still, my hands fisting in the silks as his hand slid between my thighs again, finding my core. "How disappointing."

Rough hands yanked me to my knees, my face still down in the pillows as I felt his hand moving around behind my ass, freeing his cock from those silk pants from earlier. *He'd been so kind before. What changed?*

I bit my lip as I felt him enter me from behind, his thrusts turning

me on and breaking me at the same time. He was violating me in the basest sense of the act. My body was a traitor, like he said, my pussy throbbing around him and little moans of pleasure slipping from my lips as he rocked inside me, seeking his release. When his hand trailed between my legs to play with my clit, I felt the tears flow freely from my eyes, soaking into the expensive pillows beneath my body as he found release inside me, driving me to my own release a moment later with his hand.

When I made no indication to move, he sighed, withdrawing from me with a slight groan. "I am sorry it had to be this way for you. Perhaps next time you'd prefer to participate in the activities?"

I couldn't hold onto my rage and betrayal any longer as I sat up, whirling on him as absolutely every ounce of self-preservation I had left deserted me. "Participate? You *raped me*, you animal!"

He squatted down in front of me, his cock still bobbing outside of his pants. As he reached down to slide it back into his pants, I couldn't resist peeking at it one last time. It had felt delicious inside of me, and under other circumstances, I would not have denied him.

*But it was still my body. How dare he?*

"You cannot be raped by a man who owns you, my dear. And you *are* a possession of the king, are you not?" He waited in vain for my response, so *Sir Arrogance* decided to answer himself. "You are. And so you cannot be raped because by Persian law, a wife is to provide for her husband an heir, and since you were not forced into this agreement, you must honor it."

I felt my stomach churn as I rose from the sheets, not bothering with my state of undress as I ran for the window, leaning out to lose all the contents of my stomach over the wall.

As I wiped my mouth on my arm, I heard the faint *click* of a door being shut, and I realized I'd been well and truly abandoned, finally alone.

*Just like I wanted.*

*Right?*

# Chapter 11

~Artaxerxes III~

*I had never been forced to take a woman unwillingly before.* But, as I stormed out of the Queen's compound, my hands balled into tight fists at my sides, I recalled the way she'd looked at me as I slid my fingers inside her. The image of her crying as I spilled myself inside her was gut-wrenching.

I had so repulsed her that she'd vomited out the damned window when I'd pulled out of her.

Never before had I heard of a woman denying her husband, and all my training led me to conclude that I'd done the right thing. It would never do to have a wife who thought she was in charge. This was Persia, not Athens. She would have to get used to a new way of life, that's all.

*So why did I feel sick to my stomach? Like I'd betrayed her and myself?*

*Like I was shit from a camel's ass.*

My mind whirled as I crossed the courtyard of the compound, hoping I would encounter no one on my trek to the palace, to my own quarters. There, I could get some sleep and come at this with a fresh mind in the morning.

*That's it, I needed sleep. All would be clear in the morning.*

Except it was already clear I would do no sleeping. My mind refused to turn outward, preferring to self-analyze instead as the doors to my quarters came into view. And then I heard it, behind me, the one sound I didn't want to hear at that very moment.

"So she wasn't as good of a lay as promised? You could always come warm my silks. I would be more than happy to make up for her shortcomings, my king."

I cringed at Atossa's calloused words, reminding myself she knew

not what had happened moments before in Roxani's chambers.

"Why don't you go back where you came from, cousin? You must be unhappy here, knowing I never plan to bed you and that you will never be queen because of it."

Her angry snarl echoed off the walls as I turned to see her launching herself at me, a dagger in her hands. Before I could disarm her, the sharp blade slashed across my upper arm, drawing blood. She had a second to celebrate her tiny victory before my fist closed around her throat, slamming her into a wall beside me. Those long claws of hers scratched at my hand in a futile attempt to free herself as I choked the breath from her lungs.

"You attempt to take my life, you ungrateful bitch?"

My words were a growl as I watched her face turn purple in mild amusement, sickened by my visceral reaction to her pain.

*I was aroused, killing this woman who hung from my grip.*

I hated myself at that moment, releasing her from the death grip. Her limp body gasped for air as she sunk to the floor, the strained noises that escaped her driving home my monster status.

"Please, Ochus," she begged from her position on the floor, "don't kill me. I didn't mean to hurt you, just scare you."

I looked down on this woman, her greed and jealousy getting the best of her. She felt herself above others simply because of her status, and suddenly my heart broke as I realized she was me, and I, her.

We were both monsters who saw fit to take what we deemed ours.  
*And to hate her was to hate myself.*

"Come," I urged her, yanking the girl to her feet roughly. "You want to live, you'll be confined to your room until I decide what to do with you."

I marched her crying form all the way back to the Queen's Compound, thrusting her into her room unceremoniously as the door shut with a *bang* behind her. The guard eyed me warily.

"She is not to leave this room, and I expect another of you to

position beneath her window, so she may not escape that way, either. Someone will bring her meals, and her servant is to be assigned elsewhere for now.”

The guard nodded, his partner down the hall splitting up to head for the outside of the compound.

*Now I had a woman to apologize to.*



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

My body ached everywhere. I felt dirty, used. Ashamed that I hadn't done more to fight him off. Angry that my body had betrayed him all the way to an orgasm.

*Was this what it was like to be raped?*

If I hadn't already emptied my stomach over the windowsill, I'd be at it again. Instead, I dry heaved as images of his beautiful, powerful body above mine rolled through my mind. *I'd wanted it. Just not like this.*

Now there was a very good chance I would never get home. There was a chance I was pregnant. There were a lot of what-ifs—too many unknowns for me to handle. So I slipped into the silks, the lovely white gown discarded over a chair in the corner. My body shivered as I felt the chill of the night sneaking in. I could do nothing about it, though, unless I were brave enough to wrap up in some silks and ask a guard to start me a fire.

After about ten minutes of the uncomfortable chill, I moved over to the wall, yanking a short dress from the trunk Ricine had sent over. It was a basic Athenian toga, with some jewels and an extra silk bolt added to appear more regal. I shrugged, figuring it was better than nothing to sleep in.

My hand reached out to the handle of the door, yanking it back as I

steeled myself to speak to a guard who had probably heard me being raped in the other room.

And I came face to face with my worst nightmare.

*“Fuck,”* I whispered before I fainted dead away on the hard floor beneath my feet.



\* \* \*

~Artaxerxes III~

I lifted the poor thing from the floor, hurrying inside her room to avoid having to explain her current state to anyone who might pass me by. I'd dismissed her guard until dawn, so it would be up to me to make sure she stayed safe. *Even if that meant keeping her safe from myself.*

Once I'd set Roxani on her silks, a glance around the room told me she hadn't thought to have the guards bring her any wood for a fire. *I'd never loaded my own wood, but it appeared I didn't have a choice.* I'd been stupid to dismiss her guard so quickly. Now it would be up to me to gather some wood from the main hall, drag it back here, and try to start a fire. *This is what I have servants for.*

The wood I found in the pile was obviously the pieces others had picked over in favor of better ones. The logs were still green and moist from some water that had seeped around them during the last rain. When I finally returned to Roxani's room with the wood, I was out of breath and irritated, my arm still bleeding from the cut of Atossa's blade. I dropped the logs unceremoniously on the hearth of the fireplace, carefully selecting the driest pieces for the center of the fire, laying the wet ones on the outside to help dry them as the others burned.

If placed inside the fire, their moist insides could douse the flame.

I heard a stirring behind me but refused to turn around, my whole

body stilling to keep from shocking Roxani again in case she'd woken up.

When her body stopped shifting in the silks, I breathed a sigh of relief, returning to my current task at hand: the fire. She must be freezing in that tiny dress of hers. And she hadn't bothered to pull any of the furs down to the bed, telling me she was unaccustomed to the cold evenings and hot days.

*Did they not have seasons like this in her home?*

The first flickering hints of fire danced among the tinder in the fireplace, then went out as quickly as they had come, leaving me more frustrated than when I'd begun. I swore into the darkness in the room, tossing a log against the back of the fireplace in my misplaced anger.

*I was angry with myself, not the wood. I was an arrogant fool, and an incompetent one, at that.*

I barely noticed as a small form knelt on the hearth beside me, reaching out silently to retrieve the log I'd thrown, replacing it in a strategic place on the fire as her fingers worked to gather the tinder closer together. Roxani's eyes were trained on the fireplace, small hands intently working to rebuild the fire I'd stacked and then ruined. I dare not move for fear that I might spook her. Instead, I watched her skilled hands coax life from the tiny embers at the base of the fireplace, stoking the small fire I started back to life with a gust of air from her lips.

She sat back on her heels, pleased with the results as she stretched out her hands to the fire, warming them in the soft glow of the flame.

*I could apologize now. Break this odd silence. Let her know I didn't mean to hurt her.*

But her lips moved first, and her words were like a dagger between my ribs, piercing me straight to my core.

"Why did you come back?"

I swallowed my pride, anger, and indignation that she would take away the opening I'd been about to leap into. "Because I wanted



to.”

“You will find no willing partner here tonight, your highness. Therefore, I’d advise seeking someone else’s company.”

Her words were laced with anger and something else I couldn’t quite put my finger on. “I do not intend to take my pleasures from an unwilling partner.”

“Hah,” she exclaimed, her yelp laced with sarcasm. “You expect me to believe that after you took me as a *very unwilling partner* not an hour ago?”

*That stung, but she was right.* I should have just apologized right then and there, but my pride got in the way once again, and the words that emerged from my lips were not the ones I’d intended to say. “Your body spoke differently, pet.”

“My *body* doesn’t know what it wants. My *mouth* said no, and that should have been enough!”

I cringed as her words washed over me, stoking the fire of my shame further. *Along with my rage.* I had never been spoken to like this by a woman of my harem. *Roxani should learn to keep her mouth shut sometimes.*

“I ah,” I began, running a hand over my face as if to wipe away the stress. “It will not happen again.”

“You’re damn right it won’t,” she huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’d like to go to bed unless you have something to say about *that*.”

I looked over to the silks on her sleeping nest, sighing heavily. “You’re going to want to bring a fur down to line your bed mat and a second to sleep beneath when the chill settles in every evening. Then, when the winters come, you will need a fire going all day and more furs and silks to keep you warm.”

She stared at me impatiently, as if I was missing the point. “I can handle myself, thanks.”

I shrugged, moving to pull the furs down since she seemed unlikely to move from her spot before the fire. When my hands closed around the thickest fur, I felt her steady gaze burning a hole in my

back. Sure enough, as I stretched it out on her bedding, I noticed the glare directed my way.

“You don’t have to stare at me like that. I’m just trying to help.”

She stood to her full height, which wasn’t much, and stepped in front of me, staring up at my face with a stubborn frown on her lips. “I can handle it myself. I would appreciate it if you left now. My thanks for the fire.”

I blinked at her in confusion, my ears not connecting to my brain properly. *Surely she didn’t just dismiss me?*

“Excuse me?”

Her brave exterior armor took a direct hit, the courage she’d built up deflating beneath my dominant stare from above.

“I said, I would appreciate it if you left. I no longer wish for your company in my quarters.”

My mouth hung open as I realized I had missed my opportunity to apologize. I’d turned myself around and let pride get in the way, mixing my brain up until I’d backed myself into an even darker corner than before. “But I must leave on campaign tomorrow. I wish to get to know you, spend time with you.”

“Should have thought of that when you were taking liberties and my dignity. Now, if you would, please, I’d like to be alone.”

I didn’t realize I’d moved towards the door until my hand rested on the cool metal of the handle. I sighed deeply, realizing I’d just have to try again when I returned from the campaign. *Perhaps my Roxani would be more perceptive to me after a short time apart.*

“I find myself allowing you far more liberties than the other women. Consider yourself lucky.” My tone was sharper than necessary, but the message was received as intended if her sharp gasp was any indication. “If you should need anything while I am away, you have only to ask. Bagoas is very capable of acquiring anything you could need, and the guards are at your disposal. But you are not to leave the city, is that clear?”

“Back to bossing me around, are you?” Her foot tapped impatiently against the stone floor, driving me almost batty with the repetitive

sound.

My hand curled around the metal handle of that door, clenching tightly. “If you leave the city while I am gone, I cannot promise your safety. If you doubt the dangers of traveling alone, ask your servant to explain it to you. You are a stranger in a foreign land, Roxani, and you should probably learn to respect the rules we play by in my world. I *will* come to you when I return. Hopefully, you are a more willing partner by then.”

And with those words still lingering in the warm air of the room, I made my exit, slamming the heavy wooden door behind me.

*It would be a long night.*

# Chapter 12

~Roxanne~

The morning sun awoke me with a start, my whole body shaking as the chill settled into my now-exposed skin. I cringed as the memories from the night before came rolling back in, swamping me with a wave of depression and guilt.

*Would I deny him still when he came back from his campaign? Would he force himself on me again?*

These thoughts raced through my mind, fragmented and broken, just wisps of conscious thought as I stood, shivering hard now. The sun had started to warm the outside walls, but it would still be a few more hours before the temperature got hot. Even as I stood there, barely naked and shivering, the chill had subsided somewhat, allowing my body to calm down the shakes that wracked it. A glance at the fireplace told me the fire must have been out for at least an hour, maybe longer. There were no warm embers still glowing in the pit, and the room and chimney were both devoid of smoke.

I sat back on my bed pallet, wrapping some extra silks around my shoulders as I glanced around at the room, the faint light illuminating it just enough to see. My dress sat on the chair across the room, the beautiful white fabric flowing over the back of the wooden seat like a river. My trunks still sat in the other corner, awaiting their contents' removal.

*I want a bath before I put on any of those beautiful new clothes—no reminders from last night.*

Just as I was about to stand, the door between my room and Layla's opened. I smiled sadly as she poked her head in, trying to be quiet for my benefit. "I'm already awake, so there's no need to worry."

"Oh, that's good. I'm not really a quiet person, anyhow. It's a bit early for a noble to be rising; is everything alright?" Her eyes went

to the fire, a blush creeping up her throat and into her cheeks as she took in the chill of the room. "Oh no! I forgot to make you a fire!"

I remained seated on those silks, watching her as she flitted around. *I was at a loss as to how I should act.*

"Oh, it's okay. I'm pretty good at starting fires, Layla."

"Did you have to make this fire yourself last night?" Her eyes searched mine, and I wondered for the briefest of seconds if she had been close enough to hear me protesting.

*To hear me be raped.*

"No, I didn't do it alone. The king was kind enough to haul some wood in for me after sending the guards away."

"Oh!" She bustled around the fireplace, poking at the ashes. "Well, I'm thankful he was here to take care of it for you, but in the future, if you need a fire, you just have to ask me for one. I have some extra wood storage in my room so that we don't have to go hunting for it later, and I don't mind getting up in the middle of the night to add more wood to both fires."

I threw my hands in the air, feeling like an incompetent fool. "I am perfectly capable of handling it on my own, Layla. But I do appreciate your offer to stoke the fire overnight. I am a heavy sleeper most nights."

Layla's braid bobbed over her shoulder as she bent at the waist over my trunks, sifting through the clothing in them. She tossed a glance over her shoulder at me before turning back to the chest before her, pulling out a lovely yellow gown I recognized as the toga I'd come into town with.

Except not exactly.

Ricine had added a swatch of pale golden silk around the shoulder strap, removed the other side's strap, and cut out a few pieces of fabric to allow for a better range of movement and show more skin.

*The first part, I didn't have much issue with. The second part took some getting used to.*

"How's this one for today, madame?" Layla twisted it back and

forth, the added gemstones shining in the fast-growing daylight.

"Please, just because I'm the wife of a king doesn't mean you start acting like I'm different. I'm still Rox—Roxani."

Layla's eyes rose to meet mine, confusion swimming in them. "I thought you said your name was Roxanne."

"I did."

"So, what changed?"

I sighed in frustration, shaking my head. "The king says I'm to be called Roxani now, so I'm trying to embrace it." I shuddered as I remembered our last encounter before he left the night before. "Hey, is it as unsafe as everyone claims to walk around unattended in the city?"

Layla's eyebrows practically shot off her head in response to my question. "In certain spots, you should be fine with a guard or just a servant. But there are some places in a city this size that I'd never step foot into alone. You could be kidnapped, sold off, *worse*. It just depends on who gets ahold of you."

My lips turned down in a frown as I realized Ochus *hadn't* been kidding. *He'd been trying to warn me, even after being a huge asshole.* He'd said it out of concern for my safety.

*Did it really change anything? I wasn't sure.*

"The king said he'd be gone on campaign for awhile. And I've never been outside of my little village. You know what I could use in the meantime?"

Layla looked perplexed at my sudden change in direction, but she rolled with it well. "What, Roxani?"

"A lesson or twenty on how to act here. And I hear Bagoas is your go-to person if you need anything around here."

Layla nodded, a smile breaking out across her lips. "I met him last night, in the servants' quarters. He's a nice guy for a eunuch. They're usually older dudes with an attitude. Bagoas is so friendly and outgoing." She blushed before quickly looking away, her hair partially obscuring her face from view.

I was beginning to think maybe someone had a little crush.

"I'm not sure I remember how to get to the baths by myself, so maybe you and I could head there, freshen up, and then go hunting for him?"

Her eager nod made me smile as she hefted the yellow gown into her arms, grabbing my hand to lead me from the room. We passed a guard on our way out of the room and picked up a guard tail as we exited the building. Layla didn't seem to think anything of the new addition to our party, but I did. I ground my feet to a halt, forcing Layla to stop with me as I turned around to square off with the guard.

"Is there any reason you're following us within the walls of the compound, sir?"

The guard looked stunned, as if he couldn't believe I was speaking to him. "I was ordered to you, your highness. The king decreed that a guard was to always accompany you through the city. It can be a dangerous place, especially with the recent attempts on the king's life."

I tried to remain aloof, but a pang of fear shot through my heart at the news. *Someone out there wants to kill Ochus.*

*Oh, right. He gets assassinated eventually.* "Well, we won't be needing your presence inside the baths, um—"

"It's Erudite, ma'am."

"Right. Well, Erudite, I appreciate your protection while out and about, but while we are in the bathhouse, I would appreciate it *more* if you waited outside."

"As you wish, ma'am." His stoic demeanor reappeared as we returned to the trek ahead, winding our way between the buildings with few other people around us.

*Perks of being an early riser, I guess.*

He posted up on the outside of the bathhouse when we arrived, offering a small wave as we disappeared inside the abnormally warm caves. Inside, there were a few women wearing servant garb milling about, preparing for the day themselves. Layla made her

way over to the largest pool, clearing her throat pointedly in the direction of the other women milling about. The ladies glanced at her, then to me with wide-eyed horror, scurrying off in the other direction.

*Did I really look that bad after last night?*

I absently patted my hair, wondering what I could have done to make the women rush off.

From across the room, Layla's voice called me from my internal thoughts. "Hey Roxani, I've set your dress over here for you, I have drying cloths ready for when you're done, and the water is nice and hot. You may as well take advantage of the little bit of alone time you have. I'll step outside if you'd like."

*Did I want to be alone?*

I said nothing, stripping the short dress off my body. The soft fabric slid smoothly down my arms as I felt a tear slide down my cheek, mirroring it. The light fabric pooled around my feet as I stepped from the circle it had made around me. My soul ached, and hopefully, I could burn away the shame of the night before, the memory of the betrayal, the emotional pain of being refused the fundamental human rights I'd always taken for granted.

When my feet finally reached the water, I let everything else in my mind go, pushing all of it from my mind as I stepped into the hot water around me. As the water climbed higher on my body, so did my temperature, increasing with every inch I moved forward. As the water enveloped me, it stripped me emotionally and embraced me physically. I let all the worries and cares I had just run out of me, arms outstretched at my sides to skim the top of the water before plunging myself deep into the water below, completely submerged.

*A minute of this, and I could just end it. Maybe I'd wake up in my bed at home and go back to college with my half-assed finals project and graduate. Get that job. Help out my mom. Go back to pretending everything was okay still.*

But that wasn't me talking. That was desperation, and I knew better than to give in. My head broke the surface of the water, sending



ripples out around me in every direction. Those ripples could be water, or they could be time, for all intents and purposes, and here I was, disturbing both. I had to get my head together. If the king intended to take what was his, I'd have to escape or risk screwing shit up even worse than I originally had.

Even if it wasn't my fault.

I heard a commotion at the archway after what felt like forever, subconsciously reaching for the small scrubbing tools that had been laid on the side of the pool to slough off the dead skin from my body. *And anything else that didn't belong.*

Layla approached carefully, as if she might set me off if she got too close. "Um, Roxani, the rest of the women begin to stir now, so if you're trying to avoid the crowd, I suggest we get you finished up and out of here."

I glanced over my shoulder at her, nodding slowly. My feet moved to climb the stairs on the side of the pool, water sluicing off my body's peaks and ridges as I stood there, waiting.

*For what, I had no clue.*

"Layla, do women here refuse their husbands?"

Layla's hands deftly maneuvered a towel around my body, oblivious to my shame as she dried my body. "What do you mean? Like are they allowed to make up their own minds?"

I shook my head, wanting to be more specific but afraid to open up. "I mean in the bedroom. Would I be beheaded if I refused the advances of a man who was my husband?"

"You would refuse the king? *Why?*"

*Why, indeed?* "I was just curious what types of rights women had here. I knew back in the city-states, we could own property, run businesses, choose our sexual partners, hold jobs. What about in Persia?"

"Well, in Persia, the rules are mostly the same. But women here are even allowed to handle money, and they're almost worshipped. As a bride to the king, though, I'm sure there are some other rules I'm not aware of. Perhaps we could ask the other wives at the morning

meal?"

"Perhaps," I said, not committing to anything. I wasn't sure how I felt about talking to other women who had shared the silks with the voracious and appetizing King Artaxerxes III. *Had any of them also been unwilling?*

Layla helped set my hair in a tight braid as I slipped the dress over my head, the yellow silk molding to my slightly damp skin. *Shit. As if I needed any more reason to hate this time—no blowdryers, no conditioner, no towels.* We managed to hustle out of the bathhouse before any other women entered, rejoining our guardsman at the door before heading off for food. My stomach was making some unflattering noises, and they didn't go unnoticed. After the third loud growling, I could hear the guard behind us struggling not to snicker at my appetite.

Layla had also broken out in a grin as my stomach roiled once again, the pungent smell of eggs and something else hitting my nostrils. My nose must have carried me to the kitchens, where the cooks took pity on me and fed me until I threw my hands up in defeat, waving off their next offering. Their foods were so different from what I'd grown up with, but they were delicious and filling.

I heard a commotion in the main dining area just as we made to head out of the kitchens. Curious, Layla and I snuck closer to the doors separating the kitchens from the dining hall, peeking out to quite a scene.

Three women stood in the center of the room, one of which was Atossa. I didn't recognize the other two, but their faces were frightened and anxious, obviously of the now-seething woman who had her hands around one of their necks. She screeched at the top of her lungs as she strangled the younger woman, the poor girl's hands clawing futilely against Atossa's grasp. I moved to step forward just as Layla's hand reached out to grab me, but I had known she would try to hold me back, away from danger. I slid easily past her hands, moving quickly towards the center of the room to help however I could. Atossa's screeching could still be heard echoing off the walls as I closed the distance between us.

"How *dare* you speak to me like that! It's only because of sheer luck

that you managed to weasel your way into this castle as a wife of the king, and I'll see to it that you don't spend another night breathing at his expense."

I reached out a hand, fisting it in Atossa's hair before yanking it backward, *hard*. She fell on her ass in the center of the dirty floor, releasing her hold on the gasping girl. Her eyes swiveled to meet mine, and I knew then that this menacing woman would kill me if given the chance.

"How *dare* you put a hand on me! Do you know who I am?"

I sighed as she struggled to her feet, failing miserably at dusting the dirt from her sheer silk clothing. *Ever the modest woman, this one. She'd make a whore from a whorehouse blush.*

"Atossa, I don't care who you are. You would have killed that poor girl, and she's half your age. Why don't you pick on someone who can fight back?"

Her sharp eyes glared daggers at me, narrowing menacingly. "Like you?"

I pulled my fist back just as she launched herself forward, and as my hand swung forward to meet her jaw, I realized maybe this hadn't been the best plan of action, but it was too late to turn back now. When my balled-up fist connected squarely with her jaw, propelling her backward, I had a moment of satisfaction as she screamed out in agony, her hand clutching the spot where I connected as she reeled. I watched her not-so-graceful fall to the ground with a fair amount of pleasure, offering my hand to the girl who had been struggling for air a moment before.

"Here, stand up. She won't hurt you now."

The young girl and her friend scurried behind me, using my body as a shield between them and the very angry Atossa. The bedraggled woman stood before me, her hands flailing as she tried to save face in the eyes of her audience.

"You don't have any power here, you ungrateful bitch. You stride in here, head held high though you were but a concubine, and the king suddenly decides to put you in the queen's quarters. You must think you're so special, but I have news for you. I was the first, and

I will be the last. I won't let a farmhand like yourself rob me of what's mine! If anyone is to be queen around here, it's *me!*"

Two guards rushed into the dining hall, wrangling Atossa amidst her vocal protesting. When the shrill harpy was out of the building, things seemed to quiet down for the most part, and I turned to find my friend, Layla, hoping she hadn't run off and left me here to fend for myself.

And came face to face with Layla and the two women, standing right behind me, eyes wide with wonder.

Layla broke the silence first, her words carrying a heavier warning that I couldn't wrap my head around. "You've only added fuel to her fire, Roxani. But that's one fine swing you have. My brothers would have been proud of such a fighting skill. And they're Spartan soldiers."

I blushed, corralling the women as I rushed them out of the crowded room. "Why don't we get out of here before we become today's gossip?"

I made it three feet from the archway to freedom before a lilting male voice called out, stopping me in my tracks.

"We're going to have to do something about your form. You could swing faster and with a deadly accuracy if you knew how to hold your feet better, Roxani."

*Bagoas.*

# Chapter 13

~Roxanne~

Bagoas led us all away to the gathering spot, settling the group into a pile of pillows off to the side before asking what happened. Of course, as one could expect from four women running on an adrenaline rush, we all spoke at once and confused the poor man.

He threw up his hands, halting our frenzied words. “Okay, let’s try this again, shall we? Roxani, what happened?”

He turned to me with a knowing smile, waiting for my level-headed answer. “Well, Atossa was choking the life out of this poor girl, and I stopped her.”

His brows shot up in surprise, his smile turning to a frown. “Atossa was not supposed to be allowed to roam free. She made an attempt on the king’s life before he left, out of spite and jealousy.”

“She tried to kill him?” Was Atossa the assassin who eventually took the king’s life? I couldn’t remember, and suddenly it frustrated me more than it should.

*He hurt you, remember that.*

Bagoas turned to Layla, still frowning. “Where were you when she was facing off with the viper?”

Layla’s indignant stare could have burned through a lesser man. “I tried to hold her back, but she’s a lot stronger than she looks.”

Bagoas’s gaze now fell to the two women whose names I still didn’t know. “Amaya, Dido—what exactly happened to set Atossa off? Why did she attack you?”

The darker-skinned woman spoke first, her black curls bouncing around her face as she spoke. “Well, Atossa has been entertaining a few of the guards in exchange for liberties the rest of us are not afforded, and Dido caught her red-handed with her lips around one

of their, you know, on her knees this morning. When Dido wouldn't swear to keep it quiet, she chased her to the meal space. She told Dido the only reason she was here was as a status symbol, so Dido snapped back at her."

Bagoas's eyes were alight with mirth, but he kept his laughter at bay as he turned to a pale woman with red hair, obviously a foreigner in this land. *This must be Dido*. "So, what exactly *did* you say to her when she insulted you?"

Dido's blush covered the pale freckles scattered along her cheekbones; her voice was quiet as she answered the question. "I said at least I didn't have to get on my knees for a guard to get some action."

Layla and I burst into hysterical laughter, Bagoas's small chuckle joining ours as Dido and Amaya blushed profusely. When we'd finally stopped laughing, Bagoas clapped his hands together, grabbing our attention.

"Well, this has made for a wonderful morning. It seems I have some guards I need to speak to about their lack of ability to do their jobs. Perhaps you ladies would enjoy some time out here in the gathering as you get to know each other?"

Bagoas didn't wait for us to answer as he strode off back towards the main quarters, his powerful stride all-business as he disappeared out of sight. I turned to the two new women, holding a hand out for them to shake. When neither woman took the offered hand, I put it down, realizing that probably wasn't a thing here in Ancient Persia.

"Uh, so I'm Roxani, from Athens. It's nice to meet you two."

We stared blankly at each other for a moment before the two women burst into peals of laughter. Dido wiped away joyful tears as she fought to collect herself. "I'm sorry, I'm just not used to someone so formal. I'm Dido, and thanks, by the way, for saving my ass."

"I'm Amaya and grateful that you stepped in. We definitely owe you one. I'm not a confrontational person, and Atossa would have killed her."

I frowned, wondering if Atossa trying to kill people was a daily

occurrence here. “Does she do that a lot? Snap on people?”

Dido nodded solemnly. “We all try not to get in her way. If you don’t make yourself a target, she considers you beneath her.”

Layla coughed, clearing her throat. “Well, I think you blew that one, Roxani.”

I glanced around carefully, hoping nobody was listening in on this conversation. “You say you owe me one? How about you teach me about this place? Aren’t you both wives of the king?”

Dido blushed again, a reaction that I was beginning to realize was a common thing for her. “Well, yeah. I don’t see why we couldn’t help you. You’re not from around here, are you?”

“This would be my second day in Persia unless you count the time I spent traveling with the convoy.”

“Convoy?” Amaya repeated, confusion crossing her face.

I backtracked quickly, trying for a term that would sound right in this time. “Caravan?”

The other woman nodded, thankfully. “Ah, yes, I came in a caravan as well. My parents lived closer to Egypt, and I was promised to the king in exchange for his protection of our lands and borders. Dido there has been here longer, but not by much. She was a ‘payment’ from a man who’d crossed the king back in the Greek city-states. He paid for the privilege of keeping his lands when Artaxerxes invaded and conquered his whole village. She was his youngest daughter.”

Dido nodded her confirmation. “My dad wasn’t too bad, honestly, but Amaya’s dad was about to start selling her off to the men in port cities, and those girls usually end up dead pretty fast.”

I shuddered at the vague stories we’d heard about women in the forced sex work trade of the ancient world. Many cultures were less inhibited, allowing their women to turn their pleasures into a lucrative business. Still, that business came with a dangerous side—aggressive, usually drunk men, who often got too handsy with a woman and maimed her, or worse—killed her.

*I was still mad at the king, but I would always be grateful that I had not ended up elsewhere.*

Amaya didn't look too pleased to be reminded of her near fate, so I moved the conversation forward. "So, I was sold into this situation by my family, and I have no idea what the customs and laws and such are around here. Maybe you could give me a crash course on what being a king's wife entails?"

Dido and Amaya exchanged confused, wary glances. "Crash course? You have such a strange manner of speech."

"Uh, a lesson; a *fast* lesson."

The girls nodded, smiling widely. Amaya spoke first, a lilt in her voice that hadn't been there before. "Being a king's wife is like being thrust into the lap of luxury, riches, and pleasure, and there really are no rules. We can come and go as we please, with escorts for safety, of course, and we have staff at our beck and call at all times. Though you're the first woman to be given her own personal slave."

My brows rose even as I moved to correct her assumption. *So Layla was the only personally assigned servant in the palace. Interesting.* "Layla is no slave. She's a freed woman, my handmaiden. A servant, maybe, but no slave, and she's free to leave whenever she wants."

Layla gasped, her eyes as round as saucers. "Roxani, I could not leave if I chose—"

"Nonsense, Layla. The king gave you to me, and I am telling you if you should want to leave me, you are more than welcome to do so. I will not *own* another human. I find the whole practice of slavery to be abhorrent."

I noticed too late that there were suddenly many, many eyes looking our way. *Slavery was a huge part of this period, and to be so liberal with my futuristic belief system and morals would be akin to shouting blasphemy from the palace steps.*

Layla grabbed my hand, tugging me to my feet. "Hey, ladies, why don't we take this to the quarters, where we can converse in privacy?"

Amaya and Dido suddenly realized they were also the center of attention, hustling quickly and quietly as the guard rushed to keep up with Layla's quick pace. When we were finally behind the safety



of the wooden doors to my quarters, I breathed a sigh of relief.

Layla looked angry, her arms folded over her chest as she stared me in the eye. I realized this girl would soon grow to tower over me, ironically enough. “Listen, Roxani, I know you’re new to all this, but you can’t go around championing a cause like that in the middle of the daily gatherings. People might spread word that you’re soft on the slaves, that you stand against the king, and you could be put to death for your words.”

Her stern words pierced me to my soul, making me wish once again for the simplicity of my home, my time. *Why the hell Ancient Persia, of all places? Of all times?*

“I’m sorry if I caused you any trouble. But I meant every word I said. You’re not my slave--you’re my friend. If it weren’t for you, I probably would have died on that trip.”

Layla looked very interested in the ground for a moment, the tips of her ears turning a bright shade of red. “It wasn’t that heroic, sheesh.”

Dido giggled from the corner of the room. “It seems like someone had fun last night. I recognize that shirt.”

I turned in horror to realize she was pointing at a man’s silk shirt that sat discarded in a ball at the top of my sleeping area. Ochus had left it the night before when he stormed out after—

*Well, you know.*

“Yeah, uh, he did come to see me last night, but we, uh . . . we didn’t *do* anything.” At their shocked faces, I realized I had my opening to ask the sorts of questions I needed answered. “Which is why I was wondering if it’s within my rights as a woman to refuse a man. As his wife, am I obligated to give it to him?”

Dido paled. “You refused the king?”

“Not exactly, no. I just wanted to know what the rules here were, that’s all.”

Amaya perked up, the jewels around her neck catching the light as she turned. “Oh, it’s pretty lax here. Concubines have the most fun, honestly, but if the king takes a wife with no intent to keep and

breed her, usually she can get away with a little more. Of course, as a wife of the king, he's the only guy you wanna get caught with, though nobody will say shit if you're getting some on the side, as long as you're careful."

"Careful?" I blinked in shock, wondering just how much protection you could possibly find in Ancient Persia for birth control.

"Yeah, the priestesses at the temple can help you with some kind of concoction that will take care of any issues that arise from a side affair, if you catch it soon enough, and if not, they have other methods. Sometimes a woman will keep a child from a side affair, but they usually get cut down in the ranks. Their kids will never be royal, either." Amaya looked down at her stomach, a wistful smile on her face. "When I first got here, another girl down the hall from me got pregnant from a traveling nobleman, and she disappeared for a few days of 'intense meditation' at the temple. When she came back, no more sickness, no more baby. Poof, just like that. Magic."

*More like herbs, but I see the point.* "So the king doesn't mind if the women sleep around?"

Dido's smile turned hard. "What the king doesn't know can't hurt him, but I doubt it's possible to be docked lower than Atossa, and she'll sleep with anything that moves, so. But the king doesn't mind if a woman were to seek out other women for pleasure. I have a few particular visitors who can bring you more pleasure than a man ever could, and they need no dick to do it."

"*Dido!*" Amaya exclaimed at her friend's crass comment. "That's so dirty, coming from you."

Dido simply shrugged, toying with the hem of her skirt. "It's the truth. If you weren't so uptight, I'd send one to you some time. You'd be singing a whole other tune if they got ahold of your sweet bits." She looked pointedly at Amaya, whose eyes had darted to the door.

"I think I should go see if my silks are back from the laundress. I'll catch up with you later, Dido. It was nice meeting you, Roxani."

Amaya stood quickly, rushing out the door as her cheeks turned a deep shade of red. Dido waited for the door to close behind her

before bursting into uncontrollable laughter. It soon became contagious as Layla and I started laughing before realizing that Layla was still a child and should *definitely* not be hearing these things.

*Or was she?* Sure, in my time, sixteen wasn't grown, but I knew plenty of sixteen-year-olds who were sexually active back home. Here, women would often get married off younger than that. The lines were so blurry between what was acceptable in my brain and the realities of this world. I struggled to bounce between the two, forever stuck in one way of thinking and being at war with the reality of my current situation.

*Something's gotta give.*

"Hey, Layla, is there any way you could grab a guard and make sure we're stocked up for wood for the night? And I think I'd like to go to the market, but I'd like to ride there if it's a good distance away. Can you get our horses ready for us?"

Layla nodded, her eager smile covering most of her freckled face. "Sure thing! Will you just meet me at the stables when you're ready to go?"

"Sure."

*I had no idea where they were, but I was sure I could find them again.*

When the door closed behind her, I turned back to Dido, who still sat regally among my silks, her smile somewhat seductive as she trailed her fingers along the edge of a pillow. When her eyes met mine, a shiver ran down my spine. "So," I began, suddenly at a loss for words.

"So," she echoed back, "you're thinking about those courtesans, aren't you?"

I gulped back the massive lump in my throat as I nodded, hoping my voice was steadier this time. "Yeah, I am. I was wondering how I'd go about meeting them. For . . . *research purposes.*"

"*Research purposes, sure,* let's go with that. If you tell me what you're into, I can just direct one to your room later tonight." She twirled a lock of her hair between her fingers, an aloof look in her

eyes as she glanced at me out of her peripheral. “Unless you’d rather *I* show up.”

I shuddered as I imagined—briefly—the gorgeous, busty redhead above me, tangled in the silks, and a shudder ran down my spine. *Just because I didn’t want to upset the balance of time by toying with a king didn’t mean I couldn’t have some fun.* But the idea of Dido in my bed meant changing a friendship into something more, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to get into all that. “Um, as much as I appreciate the offer, I think I’d like to remain friends, Dido.”

She eyed me up and down as she bit her lower lip, chewing on it seductively. “Shame. You’re my type, right down to those toned legs of yours. I can see why the king wanted you.” Her eyes stopped undressing me for a moment, peering into my own to tear my soul apart instead. “I wonder why he didn’t just take you last night. Surely, he’s attracted to you. Are you attracted to him?”

I sighed, knowing my secret was going to come out sooner or later. “I wasn’t ready for it last night, and he . . . he forced himself on me. I do want him, but I—I just wasn’t prepared, and he ignored my refusal.”

Dido sighed, placing a hand on my shoulder comfortingly. “Ah, I understand now. You know, I don’t think I’ve ever heard of a woman denying the king on their day of marriage, but I know I’ve refused the king once or twice, and he’s been nothing but understanding about it.”

I frowned as I realized I was the exception to most of the rules around here, and I was beginning to strongly dislike how much I stood out. “Well, he was less than understanding last night, and I don’t know that I can forgive him for that.”

Dido shrugged, her eyes knowing. “Not many women can hold out against such a fine display of the male body as his. I give you a week from the time he comes back from the campaign, and you’ll cave. I know it.”

I crossed my arms, sniffing out a bet I knew I could win. *It was only a week; surely, I could pretend to have my monthlies when he returned.* “You’re on. I’ll bet a new gown on it.”

“The yellow one you’re wearing now. And if you win, I’ll bet one of my sets of gold bangles on it.”

I stuck my hand out to shake before remembering it wasn’t something they often did in this time, but Dido took my arm in a Spartan clasp and brought my chest against hers with a short bump, a show of solidarity. Putting her word on it.

*It felt nice to be close to people again.*

“It’s a deal, Dido.”

Her hair whipped around her shoulders as she moved for the door. “It’s been nice meeting you, Roxani. Perhaps we can get to know each other later.”

“Perhaps,” I mumbled at her back as the door closed behind her.

*Perhaps, indeed.*

# Chapter 14

~Roxani~

I'd blown the majority of the day browsing at the market and riding among the nearby fields with Layla and our guard escort. I had to give the man some credit—he didn't complain once when we decided to veer off-plan and enjoy the day on horseback. We'd had a relatively quiet dinner, no Atossa or Bagoas in sight, and I was currently in my room, waiting for some secret courtesan to show up at my door. Layla had decided to spend the night in the servants' quarters to kill off some of the rumors circulating about my outburst today. I'd called it damage control, and she'd been so confused that I gave her a miniature English lesson on my favorite sayings and phrases.

I had changed into something Layla called harem pants, which were basically silk sweatpants with a slit up the outside of each leg. When you moved, the slit would ripple, exposing you from ankle to upper thigh, and it felt so revealing, I'd blushed at the idea of wearing them out in public. Apparently, they were the clothing of choice for many women in the summer months, the flowing fabric making it easier to enjoy a breeze.

I could see the appeal if today's heat was anything to go on.

A knock at my door jarred me from my thoughts as a blush began to creep up my neck. "Enter," I beckoned, my pulse racing as a figure moved into the light emanating from my candles.

The woman was stunning, her pale blonde hair cascading down her shoulders as she smiled sweetly at me, sitting on the floor before her. Her long lashes fluttered as she eyed me up and down, my heart practically beating out of my chest as she neared me, letting the door close behind her.

"You must be Roxani."

I couldn't speak, so I just nodded, my head moving in a jerky

motion that felt unnatural and pathetic.

"I am Astrid. Dido sends her regards and asks that I accompany you for the night."

I blinked as the words that were once second nature to me fled from my brain at warp speed. "Uh-huh."

"Not one for words, huh? That's okay; I can work with this." She knelt on the floor in front of me, her hands reaching out to caress my face as I tried to remember to breathe. Up close, her pale skin was closer to the color of snow, and I briefly wondered how she could keep that complexion in this desert. Before I had time to ponder it too long, her lips connected with mine, and I felt myself being guided back onto the silks, one of her hands already working deftly at the skimpy top I'd fashioned from some silks this evening.

*Jesus, these women moved fast.*

"You know, if there is something you prefer I do with these hands, you have only to ask, and I shall make it happen."

*Who the hell forgot to tell us about pleasure servants in the history lessons?*

"Oh, uh, that's o-okay; I'm kind of new to all this."

Astrid sat up in a flash, her back ramrod straight. "Oh my, Dido did not tell me this. I am so sorry for being so forward. My other ladies usually prefer to have me arrive and leave as quickly as possible."

I frowned, my brain stuttering over the phrase she'd just used. "Your . . . other women?"

The leggy blonde stretched her legs out to the side, bent at the knees as she leaned back, getting comfortable next to me in the silks. "Yes, love. I service several women here in the queen's quarters. They all pay me well, so I can afford to pick and choose who and where to share my affections with, and how often."

I frowned as I looked around the room, realizing I had no money, to my knowledge. "I'm new here, and I don't know that I've got any way to pay you for your, ah, *services* tonight."

Astrid sighed, her fingers rubbing the silky material of my sleeve

between two slender fingers. "You're a wife of the king now, dear. All you have to do is ask for the money, and he will give it to you. Bagoas holds a purse for all the women when the king is away. But the first session is on me, dear. I'm going to enjoy it as much as you are." Her eyes darted up to mine as I watched her shift slightly on the silks, letting a strap on her dress slide down.

*Not that it had been very concealing to begin with, but still.*

I gasped as her breasts spilled free, her milky white skin only interrupted by the smattering of freckles across the tops of those beautiful tits. Her nipples were small but very hard, and she absently reached up to tweak one gently as I watched, too stunned to move.

"Come, now, don't be shy, Roxani. You did want this, did you not?"

I nodded slowly, trying to calm my racing heart. "I d-did."

"Then enjoy it, love," she purred, taking one of my hands to press it insistently against her breast.

I sat there, legs crossed beneath me, leaning over my lap as I petted this woman's glorious breasts like they were a crystal ball, and I the fortune teller. Astrid intentionally let her moans loose, seeming to enjoy it when I pinched that pert nipple just tight enough to make her gasp. I felt one of her hands trailing up the outside of my leg, using the slit on the side of my pants as an easy access portal. I shivered as her fingers drew lazy lines up toward my thighs, snaking in closer to the inside as she climbed higher still. Her whole hand had disappeared into my pants, and I couldn't help but gasp when her fingers brushed against the curls between my legs, probing gently.

*Holy Hell, I was coming undone for a woman.*

I slipped sideways just as her finger slid inside those folds, finding me slick and eager. I leaned against my arm as she slid that finger up and down my seam, stopping to toy deftly with my clit as I heard my moans of pleasure mingle with hers.

*I couldn't let her do all the work. If she was giving it to me for free, I might as well give her some fun too.*



I tried to be sneaky as I let a hand slide down her side, over her hip, and to the edge of her skirt, dragging the hem up slowly.

Apparently not sneaky enough. "Oh, are you a giver? I don't mind sharing the fun, but I'd rather have your tongue inside me instead."

*Excuse the fuck out of me, but WHAT? "You want me . . . to what?"*

Astrid's fingers plunged inside me, causing my back to arch as her fantastic fingers did things to my insides that had me coming off the bed. She slowed her fingers, making eye contact as she pulled them out and licked my wetness clean off them, the slow sucking sound so erotic it had me whimpering. "I want you to get on your back, Roxani, and I want you to put your mouth on me while I do the same to you." She put her fingers back down at my throbbing pussy, sliding them back in to tease me again before withdrawing them again. "What do you say? Will you let me feel your moans and cries of ecstasy against my pussy? Will you let me please you until you quake in those silks, soaking them?"

*"On God, if you make me cum tonight, I'll do anything you ask me to."*

She shoved me back in the silks, letting her hands roam over my body as she stripped me down, baring both our bodies to the night air as her hands roamed over every inch of skin I had. My soul felt like it would take flight and leave my body if she kept touching me, so I grabbed her hands and guided them back down to my eager cunt, hoping for the release her fingers would provide.

"Please, I need it, Astrid," I begged, feeling like I was out of my mind. *Who had I become, begging a strange woman to get me off? I had never been this brazen, this bold, this dirty.*

Astrid complied, thrusting those fingers inside me wonderfully as she stroked my inner walls with those slender digits. Before I reached my peak, she flipped the script on me, straddling my face as she leaned over to replace her fingers with her mouth. As her tongue moved over me, I shivered with the first wave of orgasm, that slick mouth sucking and nibbling and teasing my clit as I came, *hard*. She arched her back as she lapped up my dripping hole, pressing her pussy into my line of view.

*What the hell? When in Rome.*

I lifted my head from the silks to return the favor, sliding a finger against her swollen nub as I slid my tongue in and out of her sweet cunt, feeling my own pussy throb in response as her inner walls clenched against my mouth and its ministrations.

“Fuck, Rox, that’s so good, *just like that*,” she moaned as I determinedly sucked and fucked this beauty with my mouth, bringing her to her completion while she went back to town on me. When I felt two of her fingers slide inside me, rubbing my most sensitive of spots from the inside out as her tongue twirled my clit around in the most erotic of circles, I cried out loud enough to shake the walls. I felt a rush of liquid squirt out of me as I came, my whole body quaking, mind in the damn stratosphere.

“*Did I just . . . ?*”

Astrid rose from atop me, wiping her lips as a smirk peeked out from behind her hand. “Yes, love, you did. Has a man never done that for you?”

I shook my head no. *I’d never squirted for a man before in my damn life.*

The stunning blonde didn’t seem too shocked to hear this. On the contrary, her words only drove it home further.

“Most women tell me the same thing. Of course, I can teach men how to do these things, but I’m sure your *king* will have no problem replicating the moves needed if the stories are true.”

I blushed a deep scarlet, feeling twelve kinds of stupid as my brain stubbornly turned to the image of that man naked, standing in my room with that beautiful backside reflecting in the light of the fire, his impressive package hanging between his legs as he stared down at me.

*Dido may yet win that bet if I wasn’t careful.*

I was disgusted the next moment as I realized I was having sexual fantasies about a man who had raped me. *Who the fuck even . . . ?*

“Roxani, I would love to stay, but I have to be going. I try not to linger too long in anyone’s room to ensure discretion. Wouldn’t want to be sneaking off in the daylight, starting rumors. Seeking

your pleasure from others isn't expressly forbidden, but I doubt you want to be as known as Atossa is for her sexual exploits, correct?"

I nodded my head, ashamed to ask but too curious to care. "Are there male versions of yourself here, as well?"

Astrid placed her finger against her chin, staring at the ceiling as she pondered my question. "I don't know of many, but I have a few clients who prefer a man and a woman at the same time, and I do have a few men I will contact from time to time to perform such services with me." She paused, giving me a sly side-eye. "Is this something you would desire, Roxani?"

I blushed an even deeper red, the heat in my cheeks enough to melt ice. "No, no, no, no, not me. I was just curious, is all."

Astrid leaned in to plant a kiss on my lips, her eyes looking down at me knowingly as a smile spread across her lips. "You know, I hear Bagoas give some of the women pleasure from time to time if one were but to ask." Her smile widened as my brows rose, nearly skyrocketing off my face. "And the best thing about a eunuch who can still get it up is that they can't get you in the family way. No consequences, no strings."

She rose from my silks, sliding her dress back on quickly as she smoothed down her hair, still wearing that grin that never seemed to leave her face.

"I'll see you around, Roxani," she whispered, slipping out my door and into the night.

"See you around, Astrid," I called back, my voice raspy and thick from my position on my back in the silks.

My mind wandered for a few hours as I laid there, unable to bring myself to even move to start a fire. I knew I would regret it later, but I couldn't bring myself to slip out of bed and move around some wood.

*I missed central air and heating. Amenities I'll probably never see again.*

"Stupid fucking Persia with its stupid fucking ancient era and its stupid fucking overbearing men and the weird fucking customs and all this fucking fuck fuck fuck—aaaaargh!"

I yelled at the emptiness around me, angry and frustrated and horny and sad and depressed all at once. I couldn't tell if I was coming or going, up or down, and I didn't know what to do about it.

*What could I do about being confused, lost, and alone?*

I thought back to my very vivid and scandalous experience with Astrid, letting my fingers slide down to my still-tender folds, circling and sliding and thrusting as images of a very bare king and myself filled my mind, bringing me to completion yet again.

I would *not* be ashamed for wanting him. But I *would* still be angry.

*Maybe*, I conceded as I came again, though not as intensely as when Astrid had coaxed it out of me.

*Maybe I would remember to be angry.*

# Chapter 15

~Roxanne~

It had been damn near two weeks of this strange life here in the palace, a grand total of three weeks in the ancient Persian world. I'd tried everything I could not to upset the timeline. I'd been a good girl. I'd even thanked the ancient gods when my period had come, signaling (thankfully) no pregnancy from my forced affair.

I'd seen Astrid three more times in the last two weeks and tried to pay her each time she came, but she insisted I not spend my money on her. The meetings were, in her words, 'a mystical meeting of two souls, and would be cheapened by the exchange of money for such a thing', which I think roughly translated into 'I like you too much to have you pay me for sex'. But since I wasn't very good at this language barrier thing, I could just be reading into things too much.

Bagoas had taken me round to Ricine to acquire a few more racy pieces of clothing, and Layla had made friends amongst the other servants and some of the concubines, who I had a feeling were teaching her some things she probably shouldn't be learning yet. But I was not her mother.

*And I was not in Kansas anymore. So, just like Dorothy in Oz, I had to get used to the way things worked around here. But, unlike Dorothy, I may never get back home.*

At least one of us had a happy ending.

I was having lunch with Dido and Amaya on a relatively overcast afternoon when the king's caravan arrived at the walls of the city, heralded by the shouting and cacophony in the streets and the runner who had made the rounds to inform the ladies in the harem. *They knew the girls needed time to prepare. A returning caravan meant returning men, and some probably hadn't seen a woman in months. They'd be horny, heated, and high off the victory adrenaline, and they'd plow their way through the entire harem or their wives at home until*

*their inner beasts had been settled.*

I just hoped the king wouldn't bring that wild beast to my door. I wasn't sure I was ready for that again, and I knew he wouldn't be patient in that state of mind.

We had all convened back to my room, which was the most lavish in the compound (of course), to do our hair and apply some makeup. Primitive makeup was limited to more basic items like kohl and rouge, some powders to lighten the skin, and a few pigmentations made from fabric dye and berries and stained the skin for days.

I much preferred the bare kohl eyes and red lips look. At least it went with everything.

I'd braided Dido's hair in a fishtail braid, and for Amaya, we'd done some more Egyptian-looking box braids that hung loosely around her head, making her resemble an Egyptian goddess in her sheer dress for the night. The skirt had a few extra layers of silk beneath it, taking away the visibility of her lady bits, but her tits were on proud display beneath a sheer layer of blue silk.

Dido had chosen a more conservative top, but the slits on her long skirt were obscene, and if she shifted the right way, you could see her ass peek out the sides. Her orange fabric resembled the deep color of a desert sunset, and I admired the way it nearly matched the hair atop her head. It was a bold choice, but somehow her pale skin and dark makeup tonight pulled it together. Attractive but aloof. She would be the envy of many women tonight at the ceremony.

*These Persians threw a party for every fucking thing. Someone's birthday? Party. Going to war? Party. Is someone dead? Party. Finished a scroll? Party. Have a kid? You guessed it. Party.*

I had taken to retiring to the corner during the parties and sitting with either one of the other girls or Bagoas, who had been attentive as of late. He'd walked in on me getting dressed the other day, and as much as I'd known it was wrong, I stood there facing him as I took my time tying up the front of my dress, letting my breasts hang out as his eyes roved over them.

*It was nice to be desired by a man who wasn't forcing his way onto me.*

I'd felt his gaze burning the tender, heated flesh of my chest, but I couldn't be bothered by rational thought. I'd even smiled at him with what my mother would have called a "come hither" look smoldering in my eyes, but he'd cleared his throat, adjusted his tunic, and hurried out of the room, a grin on his face.

*And a blush.*

Now, Bagoas rushed through the doors as we finished putting the finishing touches on Dido's braid, threading beads and small shells she'd collected from the beach into the thick layers. Amaya donned a set of rubies she'd won in a footrace between her and several of the concubines. The deep red offset from the blue brought out her skin tone well and made her radiant in a room full of dull pastels. Bagoas turned to me, a frown on his face as he eyed my yellow dress warily.

"That's not going to cut it tonight, Roxani. You were wearing that when the war party left; you cannot be caught wearing it again for such an event so soon after. Tongues will wag."

I cringed as I remembered I had, in fact, already worn this dress. But I hadn't been excited to wear one of the gowns Layla had suggested. They were all so risqué, and I wasn't sure I could pull that off confidently yet.

*I wasn't sure I wanted to, either.*

I'd told Bagoas about my rough night with the king, and he'd been all ears, gentle reassurances, and consideration. He'd let me cry on his shoulder, and he'd rubbed mine as he told about the time Ochus had saved him from being abused by a high prince as a young teen. Bagoas had decided to become a eunuch out of disgust for how his body had reacted and then regretted it every day of his life, for it meant he'd never have any children.

*Sometimes, he'd said, we don't miss the things we have until we can no longer have them.*

*Boy, don't I know it.*

"What dress would you recommend?" I put my hands on my hips,

frustrated that he waited until now to mention it.

He shrugged, a smirk on his lightly painted lips. "I would say that new chest Ricine sent over should be a good start, but it's up to you."

He bowed out of the room, calling out 'one hour, ladies!' before shutting the door behind him. The girls and Layla turned on me, eyeing my dress as if it deserved to be burned. I put my hands up in self-defense, feeling much like a mouse backed into a corner. "Hey, now, you guys, what's that look for?"

Dido huffed, her arms crossed over her chest. "I seem to remember we had a bet about this day, and that dress was a wager. I'd hate to see it damaged when you lose the bet, Roxani. Perhaps we take this off and find you a more appropriate dress to wear to celebrate our husband's victorious return?"

I lifted my hands as she yanked the dress up and over my body, tossing it to the chair still sitting in the corner from last night's late-night powwow.

"Be careful with that thing. I'm going to wear it to your birthday celebration when you lose."

Amaya and Layla chuckled behind their hands, rushing over to the trunk Bagoas had mentioned a moment before. As they pulled items from the box, I went from my normal tan to a deep red, the dresses so scandalous they'd make a concubine blush.

Finally, Layla settled on one that, while still a bit edgy for me, would suffice, and I wouldn't be terribly shy in it since it resembled a cross between what Dido and Amaya wore. The top was sheer black, with tiny crystals sewn into the fabric in spots to catch the light when I moved. My tits wouldn't have much support in this thing, but they'd look great, which was a plus. The top was simply a twisted bandeau, but chains ran between the top and skirt, with two huge slits going up the front that stopped a few inches from the hem, dead center on my thighs. If I moved my legs to walk, the front panel would fall between them, affording me some decency, but the slits would also show a lot of skin, which I wasn't entirely confident doing yet.



*Could I walk out there in this? Could I act like royalty like the other girls?* It all seemed so effortless when they did it, parading around in sheer tops and skirts that barely covered a thing, sometimes pairing racy tops with slightly opaque harem pants, allowing a woman to display everything while still keeping out the sand from the wind.

*Sometimes, I wondered what the point was, wearing clothes when they were so pointless and sheer. Why not just go naked?*

This world still took some getting used to.

I slipped into the dress with the help of the other women, and we applied my makeup and straightened out my frizzy hair with some oils and two hot rocks. (I'd been a regular MacGyver to tame the curls that had come back in the dry heat with a vengeance, creating a makeshift ancient hair straightener) Just as the last chunk of frizzy hair came out of the other side of the warm rocks, Bagoas entered again, not bothering to knock.

"How are we doing, ladies? Are we ready to—oh," he said, his eyes stopping on me. "Well, you sure do clean up well when you step out of your comfort zone, Roxani. The king will be pleased that you've embraced life here so well."

His lips flattened into a tight line as he looked to Layla, nodding once. "You've got kitchen duties, and I'm with the ladies tonight. I'll come to find you if you're coming back here tonight."

She nodded and took her leave, rushing off to handle her daily chores. *They weren't mandatory for her, but she insisted on being treated the same to avoid problems. I couldn't blame her.*

Dido and Amaya exchanged a glance, hurrying out the door as Bagoas's eyes followed them, murmuring something about 'grabbing something from Amaya's room' before disappearing around the corner. Bagoas approached me, stalking carefully forward like a big cat eyeing its prey. I froze as I found myself doing a lot in these situations, my eyes wary.

"You look ravishing tonight, Roxani. I am glad you chose to wear this dress." His hand reached out to brush a lock of my straight hair behind my ear, a heated look in his eyes.

I swallowed my apprehension, fidgeting nervously under his gaze.

“Why is that?”

“Because,” he whispered, leaning in until his lips brushed against the side of my earlobe, “I asked Ricine to make it for you. So I could see you in it.”

I dared not move, my heart hammering in my chest as his fingers ran through my smooth hair agonizingly slow. My words were barely a whisper as I managed to rasp out, “Is that so?”

He stepped forward again, bringing us hip to hip as his free hand snaked around my waist. I stared into his deep, lustful eyes as his fingers toyed with my hair playfully. “Yes, it is. And not only did I want to see you in it,” he rasped, his hand moving to cup my ass possessively, “I wanted to see you take it off. For *me*.”

I felt like the ground beneath me was quaking, and I wished it would open up and swallow me whole right now so I didn’t have to answer that blatant invitation.

“Of course, the invitation is always open when the king’s not around to play, you know. I’ve got a soft spot for a woman who likes to hear me recite poetry.”

Bagoas recited poems from the Great Greeks, as he liked to call them, and I loved to listen, mainly because it was work I recognized. Something familiar from my time in Mythological Studies in college. *It felt like home*. I’d had no idea he noticed I’d been at every reading, not only for lack of better things to do.

He had an incredible voice, and I could listen to him talk, sing, laugh all day. There were so many beautiful people around this palace that it was a wonder I hadn’t managed to fall for all of them. As it was, I had a soft spot for Astrid and Bagoas, and Dido still propositioned me on occasion, trying to break me down over time. Now, here was Bagoas, standing before me, every inch a virile male (minus the issue of baby juice), very much interested in me. *Talking dirty in my ear, even as the king was on his way back to probably claim me as his own*.

This was a dangerous game Bagoas played, but it sent a secret thrill through me as I realized I liked the adrenaline boost it gave me. It excited me and made me *abso-fucking-lutely wet*, which in turn

confused me.

I had become a liberated, changed woman. Would I even be able to re-assimilate into polite society if I was to go back?

*Who cares*, a part of me whispered in my head.

Maybe that part of me was right, I mused. I pressed my mouth against Bagoas's, prodding at the seam between his lips with my tongue in a full embrace of the dangerous game we played.

*If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.*

# Chapter 16

~Artaxerxes III~

*I was angry.*

More than angry, I was *furious*. Finding out that my eastern borders were under attack after the victory on the other front lines meant my home stay would be short-lived. I would have one, maybe two nights before I would need to ask my men to move out again, right after promising them a week or more at home.

What a pity. A leader who doesn't keep his word is a bad one.

I straightened in the saddle, letting my mind wander to thoughts that had plagued me since I'd left on this campaign.

Thoughts of *her*.

*Roxani.*

The first few nights, I'd wallowed in self-pity and shame, realizing I'd hurt her more than I'd intended to. I had no idea where she'd come from, given her less than a few hours to get used to the idea of being married to me, and then forced myself on her when she'd asked me for more time. Just because her body sang to mine.

I was a sad excuse for a man. I'd never forced myself on a woman. There was never a need to. Plenty of my women were eager and willing to get on their knees in the silks and worship me like a god. So why was I hung up on this one woman who wanted nothing to do with me?

*Because she was the first woman to tell you no. The first to challenge you. And you failed the test.*

My inner voice was annoying but probably correct. It was very seldom wrong, especially when it came to things like women and war.

*Especially women.*

I'd been riding for two days straight, and every stretch of space between stops was an uninterrupted gap of time filled with thoughts of how Roxani's body had looked in that white dress before I'd defiled her. Thoughts of how I'd make it up to her for doing the unthinkable. For making her feel unsafe in her own home.

*My father would have been ashamed.*

I had purchased a few scrolls while abroad, hoping they would serve as a nice gift for my sweet songbird. I somehow just knew she wouldn't be one of my wives who lusted after fancy trinkets or shiny jewels. She would appreciate the more thoughtful gifts, those that imparted knowledge even as they entertained.

And so I got her decorated scrolls from the various Greek collections scattered about. Soon, I would see that she had shelves built in her room for all the things she would collect over the years when I came back from conquests and campaigns. Perhaps she would occasionally travel with me.

*I would like that. I could show her a world bigger than any she could imagine.*

If only I could get her to forgive me.

I would meet with Bagoas before I went to the celebration in the great hall, feel out the atmosphere in the harem before I decided how to proceed tonight.

I was in a decidedly better mood when the walls of my wonderful city rose against the evening sun on the horizon. Having a clear plan of action helped set me in a better mood; knowing I would be home soon put me even more at ease. I could enjoy the excellent food provided by the kitchens, take a nice, hot bath in the caves, away from the other men, and maybe with a woman to accompany me.

*Maybe Roxani.*

When I finally guided my stallion into the stable corral, I was eager to be clean and celebrate with my people. But first, Bagoas. And if Bagoas was still the predictable creature he was known to be, he

would probably be found somewhere in the Queen's Compound.

I met him coming out of the residence house, a smirk on his face and his tunic askew. "Bagoas, my good man, join me for a bath?"

His eyes went wide like a frightened deer during a hunt, his whole body pivoting to stare directly at me. His smirk disappeared and, in its place appeared a frown as he stared at the layer of mud on my clothing and skin. "My good friend, you're going to need to bathe alone today. You may want to dip in the river a few times before you commit to the springs. Wash off a layer."

I clapped a hand roughly on his back, the force of it sending him staggering forward a few feet. "You've got a point. Have you ensured all the women look their absolute best tonight?"

He nodded once, the smirk returning to his face. "Oh yes, of course, Ochus. I even managed to get your new pet acclimated to our culture somewhat while you were away."

I felt a tingling in the pit of my stomach as I wondered what Roxani would be wearing tonight at the celebration. "Has she made any friends?"

*I hated to think she'd been alone this whole time, without a single soul to turn to but her servant girl.*

Bagoas nodded excitedly, setting me at ease. "She made fast friends with Dido and Amaya, two of your favorites. Loyal to a fault, those two. Did you know your Roxani can throw a punch better than most men I've met?"

"You're kidding," I half-whispered, shocked by the revelation and somewhat amused. "Well, that is interesting."

"Since she was so agile with her fists, I also taught her to throw knives."

*Of fucking course he had.* "Sounds like I should probably watch myself around her, now that she can handle a knife as well."

Bagoas's eyes darkened as he met mine, and I knew at that moment that this man knew of my shame. "I would not recommend harassing Roxani tonight for your pleasures of the flesh, highness." *He only used that tone of voice when he meant business.* "She is still

hurting inside from her first night as your wife.”

His gaze never wavered, and I felt the weight of all my actions like a suffocating blanket covering me, weighing me down. *I only had a few nights to convince her I was sorry, or I could lose her forever.* I nodded, showing Bagoas I would heed his suggestions. “Perhaps Dido would be more accepting of my advances tonight. But I do wish to see my new bride. I have brought her gifts.”

Bagoas glanced back at the building that housed my women, a strange look on his face. “Roxani and the others should be out soon, your highness. Allow me to fetch them.”

“Nonsense,” I muttered, “ we can wait for them in the great hall. I should wash up before I go handling women dressed in their finery.”

Bagoas’s head bobbed in agreement. “A wise choice, sir.”

*Perhaps it was,* I contemplated as I made my way alone to the men’s bathhouse, eager for a good soak and a good scrubbing. I would see the women at the celebration. There was plenty of time for me to shower them with gifts and attention.

*Or one in particular.*



\* \* \*

I strode into a celebration in full swing, drinks being bandied about from one body to the next as the music echoed among the pillars and stone walls, creating a chilling effect. I scanned the crowd, quickly picking out Amaya and Atossa in the group. Amaya was in the corner, chatting with another woman from the harem, a concubine who I admittedly had never actually met. She belonged to me, but she wasn’t mine in such a sense.

*Perhaps it was time to thin out the herd. Let women go who I had no intentions toward, let them have a life, a family if they so choose.*

*Or perhaps I'm just a bit eager to shove my problems onto others.*

Atossa stood between two guards, wearing a very demure and conservative gown, no doubt Bagoas's doing. He wouldn't have wanted her tempting the guards while she was under constant watch. Standing beside the main doors was Dido, her stunning orange gown like a beacon in the room.

*But where was Roxani?*

I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off as the room quieted for my arrival, a new round of hoots and hollers going up in the air as people cheered the short-lived victory. I gave a short speech once I'd arrived on my seat at the head of the festivities, waiting for Bagoas to find me.

I didn't have to wait long. The man approached in a blue two-piece silk outfit, his shirt doing nothing to conceal his smooth chest and those abs he was so proud of. While slightly less obscene, the pants were a more masculine version of the women's harem pants and showed off his toned calves as he sauntered up to my seat. He flashed a dazzling smile, probably the same one he'd shown off around the room to all the attendees.

"Ah, my king, how are you finding the festivities?"

"I would enjoy them more with Roxani at my side, but I have not seen her all night. Where is she?"

Bagoas sighed, sitting down in the seat next to me as he kicked his feet up and smirked. "She's been out in the courtyard with most of the other women. If you take a short walk out there, you're more than likely to run into her. She's wearing black."

I closed my eyes for a brief second, wondering what kind of black dress she would have on. Knowing Roxani, it would be something more conservative and Greek in style. "Thanks for the tip. I think I'll take a little walk."

I stood from my seat at the table, making my way down the stairs and outside onto the stone platform overlooking the courtyard. I scanned the crowd, looking for Roxani's thick curls and gladiator sandals. I went from one end of the square to the other, not finding her anywhere. *Surely I must be mistaken. Bagoas wouldn't mislead me.*



Once more, I swept my gaze through the women, studying each one carefully. I ticked off the ones I recognized and those whose skin tone didn't match my Roxani's golden hue. Finally, my gaze stumbled onto the next woman in the yard, a well-rounded figure with long dark hair, straight down her back like a waterfall, dancing to the music with her hands in the air, her hips swaying seductively from side to side.

*Turn around*, I begged her silently, willing her to face me so I could figure out who she was. Put a name to the body. And then, as if she could hear my thoughts, the seductress turned around, her gaze lifting to my vantage point atop the balcony, her eyes meeting mine, and I realized I'd missed her not once, not twice, but nearly three times.

The goddess who stared back at me had Roxani's eyes, but they'd been lined with a layer of black kohl that made her look mysterious and untouchable, those red-stained lips begging to be kissed as she smiled at my imposing figure silhouetted against the waning sun.

I knew she couldn't hear me, and there was no way I could hear her, but I watched her lips move, forming a single word that sent chills down my spine. It was as if she'd whispered it right into my ear, from over my shoulder.

"Ochus . . ."

I mouthed her name, instantly desiring nothing more than to be with her. The dress she wore would make any Persian woman jealous, what with the high slits on either side of her legs and the daring top that cradled her breasts in slings. As it were, I itched to peel it off her and kiss every inch of her body in apology for what I had done.

*But that apology wouldn't work this time. I'd gotten myself into this mess that way. Now I had to dig back out.*

I joined her and the others down in the courtyard, the music still in full swing. After redirecting two other women, I came upon Roxani's swaying form, a smile on her face as she turned to greet me.

"Your highness, how wonderful to see you've arrived home in good

health!”

Her smile looked off, her voice sounding a bit too strained. *This was an act. She was still uneasy around me.* I reached out to embrace her, careful not to press my obvious erection against her stomach in my eagerness. Her soft hair felt like silk against my lips as I placed a kiss atop her head, amazed by the way her wild curls lay so straight now.

“I like this thing you’ve done with your hair. It looks stunning on you.” I didn’t want to let her go but reminded myself this would be a slow road, and I would have to be understanding. Slowly, I reached into the bag at my hip, pulling out the scrolls. “These are for you. I got them during my travels in Greece. Figured you might like some sort of reminder of home.”

Roxani reached out to take the scrolls from my hands, cradling them as if they might turn to dust with any sudden movement. As she twisted her body towards the fire, I realized her top was sheer black silk, revealing every inch of her perky tits to my gaze.

*Fuck.*

Biting back a groan, I ran a hand down her arm, a satisfied smirk settling on my lips as goosebumps formed on her skin. “Why don’t we take those back to your room? I have something I’d like to tell you.”

“Alone?” she whispered, an anxious tone to her voice.

I nodded, a soft smile crossing my lips. “I promise you will be safe with me. I do not intend to act like an animal this time, or ever again, for that matter. Shall we?”

She took my offered arm, letting me lead her back to her room, the festivities carrying on behind us as no one even noticed our absence.

# Chapter 17

~Roxanne~

*His whole demeanor had changed. It was like night and day, the difference in the man before me now.* Where the man who had left me broken was rough, curt, and pushy, in his place stood a calm, smooth and reserved specimen. The change was noteworthy, but I'd seen a narcissist at work before, and this could all be an act. It would do me well to be guarded.

*At least that's what I told myself before I put my arm in his and let him convince me to go off alone with him.*

He'd said we needed to talk. And that could only mean a few things. Either he'd decided to get rid of me, or he was going to take his liberties, and he wanted an obedient, willing woman beneath him. *Which I was not.*

He stayed silent the whole way back to the compound, his guards trailing a discreet distance behind us. If I hadn't turned around to search for my own, I'd have thought we were alone. *I should have known better.*

His guards stopped at the entrance to the living quarters, waiting for further instructions that never came. Ochus led me down familiar hallways that I'd memorized in the last two weeks of his absence, heading straight for my room. The lump in my throat was almost too much to swallow down, but I managed it somehow as he led me into my room, his key sliding easily into the heavy lock.

When the door closed behind us, plunging us into darkness, I realized we were truly alone, and there was nowhere for me to run. Panic set in, and I felt myself get light-headed as my hands went out to steady myself against a wall.

*No, not a wall. Ochus's sexy, rock-hard abs.*

*Oh my.*

I felt his silent presence intensify as he gazed down at me, my hands splayed on his chest as I froze like a deer in the headlights.

*There was a turn of phrase that wouldn't work in this era. What I wouldn't kill for a fucking light.*

I couldn't see much more than his outline in the faint glow coming from the window beyond us, but I knew my whole face would be bathed in the soft moonlight, revealing my innermost feelings to him through my cursedly expressive eyes.

I'd never been able to keep a secret because of those expressive eyes of mine.

When he leaned down to press his lips against mine, I panicked, my hands fisting in the material of his shirt as his arms wrapped around my waist, holding me against his body gently. His mouth moved against mine, and a low moan rumbled from deep in my chest, drowning me in the lust that accompanied it. *I wanted to forgive this man so badly. He was right; my body did yearn for him.*

But I couldn't forget what he'd done. I returned his kiss, shocked when he didn't try to push it any further than a meeting of our mouths, the soft brush of those lips against mine as his hands caressed the small of my back. *Why wasn't he taking it any further?*

His lips left mine for a brief moment, his voice raspy and low as he whispered in my ear. "Roxani, I . . ." He sighed, frustrated with himself as he shook his head, leaning slightly away from me, our bodies cooling quickly when no longer connected. "No."

"No?" I echoed, feeling slightly like a parrot as I struggled to process what was happening before me.

"No. I will not force myself on you tonight. I came here to give you back your peace of mind." I watched in stunned amazement as he reached into his shirt, pulling off the necklace he'd strung the key to my room on. He studied it sadly before holding it out to me, offering it as a show of his relinquishment of control.

*This took a lot for him.* I don't know how I knew that, but I could feel it. The weight of the meaning behind such an action was heavy on my shoulders, and I plastered a shaky smile on my lips as I took it from his waiting fingers, slipping it around my neck.

“Thank you. I don’t know what else to say, sir.”

His fingers moved to tilt my face up, caressing my chin gently as he stared intently at me. “Not sir. Call me by my name.”

“Is that a demand or a suggestion?”



\* \* \*

~Artaxerxes III~

*Ah, so I hadn’t completely broken the tigress beneath her soft demeanor. Good. “A little bit of both, perhaps?”*

“Then I will call you Arty--unless you have some aversion to it still.” Her eyes studied mine, and I felt like this was some sort of trial. It was up to me to navigate the careful wording and prevail in the right direction.

*You can do this. You’re a king. A god. Firm but gentle.* “I do not like the name so much, but as you seem to like it, I suppose I could tolerate it, so long as you call me by a more proper name in the company of others.” *A big softie. Fuck.*

Her eyes lit up mischievously, the twinkle in them being the thing she’d been missing since the day I had claimed her. *How long had she been a captive to her own misery, that her eyes had lost the sparkle?* I never wanted to see her without that glint in her eye that told me she was pleased. I would move mountains to make this woman before me happy.

*It was the least I could do for her after what I’d done to break her.*

She bounced up and down on those tiny, bare feet of hers, those delicious breasts encased in silk swinging wildly with every movement. They jumped with a deliciousness that had me practically salivating, and I had to physically restrain myself from reaching out to cup those firm mounds in my large, rough hands.

*Slow and steady. Roxani's like a skittish foal. She would require special treatment.*

"Do you really *mean it*?" she squealed, eliciting an eye roll from me as her hands clapped together in her excitement. "Oh, that's so wonderful! Thank you!"

I groaned as she bounced off to set those scrolls of hers inside one of her clothing trunks, closing it securely before locking it up. *She treasured those scrolls. Good.* It was a win for me, as far as I was concerned. My eyes were unavoidably drawn to her wide hips and beautifully rounded ass as she bent over to pick something up off the floor, the material of her skirt parting just enough for one delicious peek at that cheek before she straightened again. She stood there, holding a fabric that looked slightly familiar.

"Is that my tunic?"

She nodded, tossing it at my head. "Yes, and half the harem already knows it was in my room. Which means they know *you* were in my room."

Something about their knowledge frustrated her, but I couldn't understand the anger radiating off of her. "I fail to see how this is a bad thing."

"You . . . *what*? How do you not know why that's bad? I'm the new girl, and the night before a campaign, you come to me instead of searching out one of your other wives. There were those who felt slighted by such a move."

Understanding dawned on me as I began to see a glimpse of the cunning and astute woman my eyes had missed initially. This woman before me was brave, tackling a culture and a world she had never seen, with few friends to help her navigate it. Somehow, she'd managed to avoid being culled by the other women, making friends with two of my favorite wives and several concubines, from what I'd heard. Her cunning intelligence and bright ideas had helped her steer clear of Atossa's range of fire, even after a confrontation that Bagoas had glazed over quickly when filling me in. She was every inch the Persian wife now, down to her mannerisms in public and her state of attire. And yet . . . I couldn't help but feel like something was missing. She still felt distant,

adrift. Like I could reach her, but not all the way. There was some part of her she'd walled off from the world, and I couldn't understand why she hid it from me.

*Had she entrusted Bagoas? Another woman? Her handmaid? Was there anyone she trusted enough here to tell her deepest secrets to?*

Everyone needed a person they could talk to when the world became insurmountable alone.

*I was not yet that person for her. I may never be.* And that thought pained me more than I cared to analyze at that moment.

"I see your point, Roxani. From now on, I will be more careful in causing you issues when I am preparing to leave for a campaign. But while I am here, you have nothing to fear from anyone. I would defend you with my own life." I yanked her against me, letting her feel the hard length of my very eager manhood against her stomach before I planted a quick kiss on the tip of her little nose. "And that means tonight, I must seek my pleasures elsewhere. But I will be back. I plan to check your fire before I sleep. I would know you are warm while I am here to provide for you."

I felt her shiver in my arms, her lips parting in surprise as she searched my eyes for the lie. Her body sang to me, but I reminded myself she was in charge of her decisions. Her body could not give consent. Only her mouth and her heart could, and I would wait until I had both before I sank myself deep in this soft woman again.

*I would earn it.*

I gave her a playful swat on the ass before releasing her with a gentle shove towards her bed. She glanced back at me over her shoulders, those beautiful eyes shimmering in the low light. My hand caressed the soft metal of the handle to the door, and I wished it was her instead. The ache within me grew, and I almost turned and begged her to give herself to me.

*Almost.*

As I yanked the door open, moving through it like a panicked prey animal, I heard her whisper follow me into the hallway, a promise and a threat all in one sentence.

*"I'll be waiting, Arty."*



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

*When he looked in my eyes and told me no, it was the sexiest thing I'd ever heard a man tell me. But the denial had left me hot and needy, and I couldn't explain the ache his refusal to take advantage of me produced inside the pit of my stomach. What was happening to me? Had my traitorous body forgotten what he'd done to us?*

The short answer was yes. I'd been exposed to a rough, angry, resentful man who'd never encountered a feisty woman such as myself. Most women prostrated themselves at his feet for the chance to fuck him. Women here had a different set of morals, one not hinged on their sexual purity. I envied them their free ways, knowing their lives were spent enjoying the time they had instead of worrying what others would think. Even the older women at times wore the same garb as the younger ones, their slightly sagging breasts heavy from feeding many children still revered and admired by the men equally as much as a perkier set.

This culture embraced the body and positivity for all. Shame that we'd moved so far away from it.

I stared at the door he'd closed behind him, secretly wondering if he'd meant it when he'd claimed to be returning to my room to check the fire later.

*I'd bet my life that he comes back. He doesn't seem like the joking kind.*

I shuddered as I wondered if I should sleep in the dress I currently wore or try to find something that would afford me more modesty. Usually, I slept nude, but there was no way I was going naked if there were a chance he would come back while I slept. My mind flip-flopped as I searched around the room for a pair of palazzo pants I'd described to Ricine, the ancient day-equivalent looking



slightly odd next to all the revealing clothing most women around here wore. They were a comfortable option for sleep, though. I paired this with a wrap top, the comfortable fabric serving as the closest thing to a bra Persia had to offer in 345 BC.

Once I'd done all that, I grabbed a short ribbon I'd learned how to effectively tie and keep in place, pulling my hair back at the nape of my neck. I surveyed my reflection in the mirror, satisfied that I looked—and felt—more human, more comfortable than I had the entire time I'd been floating around in ancient Persia.

Deciding to start my own fire, I smiled when I heard a knock at the door, recognizing Layla's unique pattern we'd developed to let me know it was her at the door. "Come in," I called out, smiling as I moved to my bedding. I was suddenly very exhausted, although I thought that might have to do with the amount of dancing I'd done this evening with the other women.

*Part of it might be from my crash and burn when Ochus left my room and left me hungry for more than the sad excuse for a kiss he'd allowed himself.*

Layla bustled around the room, carrying a small stack of wood as she approached the fireplace. "Hey, I saw the king leaving your room, and the guards are posted a little farther away than normal. Does that mean he's coming back? And does *that* mean you don't need me to check your fire tonight?"

I smiled at her fast words, knowing she'd taken a bit of a fancy to one of the boys in the kitchen. They often snuck down to the docks at the edge of the water and fished, swam, whatever sixteen-year-olds did in ancient Persia. She'd been spending nights with him, too, and I didn't want to think about what might be going on *there*.

"Sure, you can have the night off. I keep trying to tell you I'm pretty used to waking up now about the same time as you come in to stoke the fire. I can handle it, even if he's not here to do it for me."

"If you're sure," she mumbled as she blew on the embers beneath the tinder wood, bringing the dancing flames to life as the room began to glow with a golden hue. "I'll probably spend the evening in Dido's wing. Maureen has been asking me to come over and

teach her how to stitch up Dido's gowns when she inevitably rips one. She's a nightmare on hemlines, apparently."

I paused for a moment in my thoughts, wondering if elastic had been invented yet. "The material they use for bowstring; it's stretchy, yes?"

Layla shrugged, rubbing her hands together to warm in front of the fire. "Sort of. But some fabrics are stretchier than others."

"I'll have to show Ricine how to make those waistlines and hemming spots with some stretchy materials so that Dido's active lifestyle will stop costing her a fortune in dresses and an earful from that redhead every time one rips."

Layla nodded, no longer perturbed by my solution to many old-world problems. To her, I must seem like one of the most intelligent people in the world, an answer for anything and everything. But in reality, it was just everyday knowledge I'd acquired in my own time that was well advanced here, before anyone had thought up the ideas I now pirated.

I was now more careful with who I gave the information to and what I told them. I didn't want to alter the timeline too much.

I'd given up on trying not to alter it at all, convinced maybe as long as I didn't do anything severely stupid, it would balance out okay. *I couldn't go falling for the king, though. That would probably cause a time ripple that could end life as we know it.*

I was really wallowing in the false sense of self-importance in the last scenario.

"Oh, Layla, did you manage to get more of those perfumes from the market today while you were out?"

I'd discovered a collection of the most beautiful smelling perfumes in Dido's rooms, and she'd shown me her favorite perfume merchant, where I'd spent half my purse for the week on so many scents and blends that the mixture could have killed a camel.

She smiled before moving to the door between our rooms, disappearing behind the partition before returning with a basket in her arms.

*Full of bottles.*

I wiggled in excitement, rubbing my hands together as she handed the basket to me, my lips as wide as my face with barely-contained excitement. As I reached into the basket to pull a bottle from the basket, I felt my eye drawn to a bottle on the far side of the basket, nearly obscured by the rest. The cork in the top of it was a slightly darker color than the rest, and when I pulled the cork, my eyes rolled into the back of my head, the scent heavenly.

It was vanilla—my favorite. And somehow, in a world of jasmine and mint, the merchant had managed to find and bottle vanilla, so I could forever smell like a cupcake fresh out of the oven.

*If the man hadn't looked like a mummy, I would go back and kiss him.* I dabbed a few drops on my wrists, rubbing them gently together as I splashed a tiny bit against my neck, the liquid drizzling down between the valley of my breasts, soaking into my top. I smiled, wondering if the king would smell it later.

*Did I want him to have his face so close to my chest?*

I thought on that, wishing it had taken me longer to come to the conclusion than the few seconds that had elapsed.

*Yes. Yes, I did. I wanted all of that and more.*

Layla strode towards her door, smiling over her shoulder at me. "I'll see you at breakfast, Roxani." She shut the door between us behind her, and I sighed as I drug the chair over to the window, stopping to grab a scroll from the chest. My fingers curled eagerly against the thick parchment of the scrolls *he* had gifted me, and I grinned, excited to open it and see what lay on the face of it. *Could I read it? Would it be something I recognized?*

I leaned against the windowsill, reading the ink stains and immaculate calligraphy from Greek poets I'd only ever read about. I recognized Plato's work and was overjoyed to finally have something I could enjoy that was my own.

*Something somewhat familiar.*

# Chapter 18

~Roxanne~

I read on for what felt like forever before my eyes began to droop. When my head tilted and brushed against the side of the window frame, I jerked awake, fighting the urge to close my eyes again and sink into sleep. I glanced out the window as I heard some rustling in the bushes not far from my window, in the connected garden. My fire had died down some, so I was masked pretty well as I peered out into the night, squinting to locate the source of the sound.

My eyes scanned the surrounding area before settling on two moving forms against a tree, partially obscured by the leaves but illuminated by the moonlight enough to identify.

The woman was one of the lower concubines, her silky black hair falling over her voluptuous breasts bared to the night air, her dress yanked down around her waist. Behind her was a much taller and very muscular man, his hands all over her body. As this was a common occurrence in the gardens, I watched, feeling slightly horny from the apparent enjoyment of the two lovers. I knew I shouldn't, but I probably wouldn't be the only one. Dido had told me stories about masturbating while she watched someone else getting some, and I wondered if I was more like the uninhibited redhead than I had initially thought.

*Was I really about to watch these two have heated, passionate sex in the gardens?*

Yes. I. Was. And I imagined myself in her place as I watched the man's hands on her breasts, caressing her nipples as his other hand snaked under her skirt, yanking it up to bare her sex to the moonlight. His hand moved down there, and I imagined him working her from the inside, sliding my own fingers inside my throbbing, slick hole, already wet from arousal. I let my other hand trail to my breast, caressing it just as he caressed the concubine's, not bothering to hide my moans as I gave myself exactly what

turned me on. Nobody knew my body better than I did, and I wanted a release I couldn't have right now. *This little fantasy would have to do.*

I watched as the man's hands went to his pants, pulling out his cock before bending the concubine over at the waist, her hands secure around the trunk of the tree for support. His hand went around his shaft as he moved to slide into her, his strokes timing well with the stroking I was doing inside myself. I felt the precursor to an orgasm as my inner walls throbbed, the movements I made sweet torture as I struggled not to give myself release just yet.

I watched the man thrust in his partner over and over, and I imagined how it would feel to have Ochus inside me again, bending me over and fucking me as thoroughly as this woman in the garden and her partner. I bit my lip, letting out a keening mewl as I felt the first tight contraction of my inner walls around my fingers, my sticky fluids coating them as I came, the sounds of the man and woman becoming more fevered. I watched her reach down to work her own slick pussy, crying out as she reached her orgasm. I stared in amazement as the man's thrusting increased in speed, hammering into her with the intensity of a wild man in heat. A beast. An animal.

*Why was that so hawt?*

I felt myself still shuddering atop my fingers as the man leaned back, letting loose a short grunt as he rammed himself deep into her, reaching his peak. I watched him pull out of her quickly, his hand yanking on his dick as he came across her back, across her asscheeks, on the ground. The concubine stood, rearranging her dress and top as the man slipped back into his pants, his face coming into full view of the moonlight.

My heart fell through my stomach to the floor, and further still when the devastatingly handsome face of the king himself came into view, and I realized I'd just watched him fuck another woman.

*I'd lusted after it. Wished it to be me.*

*I came all over my fingers, imagining his cock pounding into me before I even realized it was him in that garden.*

And now, all I felt was aching loneliness, knowing he'd wanted this release—*needed it*—and because I'd denied him, he had sought it elsewhere. An ache for the lost opportunity settled in my stomach, and I swallowed down the bile that rose in my throat.

*I was done denying this man. I'd better pack up my yellow dress and take it over to Dido in the morning.*

*Because I planned to throw myself at this man when he came into my room tonight.*



\* \* \*

~Artaxerxes III~

I'd taken out my sexual frustrations on one of the lesser concubines, having already planned to give her to a friend of mine who had just come into his leadership role. She would make him an eager and willing wife, and her knowledge in the bedroom would teach him much about the pleasures of the flesh. When I'd realized we were on the side of the quarters that Roxani's window viewed, I had just finished blasting my seed all over the back of the woman, and I had chanced a glance up at the windows, noticing the suspicious rustle of curtains in her room.

I'd known some women liked to watch, but to hear someone up there, moaning along as they quite possibly touched themselves, it had added a layer of eroticism to the whole act that had me stiffer than a plank of wood. Even now, I could probably go for another round or two, but my libido was at war with itself, knowing Roxani had touched herself while she watched me in action, but knowing she spurned my sexual advances and feared me and my intentions.

I stumbled off to the baths, knowing I could never disgrace Roxani by showing up to her room smelling of another woman and sex.



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

A faint knock at my door trickled through to the dream I'd been having, dragging me from my slumber to a dark room. *Shit, the fire must have gone out.*

The knock sounded again, and my mind scrambled as I realized it wasn't Layla's familiar pattern. I looked around frantically for my knife, knowing nobody else had any business coming to my room at this time of the night—

"Roxani, it's me. Can you hear me? I don't have a key anymore."

Ochus.

"Y-yeah, keep your shorts on; I'm coming." I rubbed the sleep from my eyes as I slid out of bed, padding over to the door as the shivering started, the temperature in the room making my nipples hard. *Sure, go ahead, body. Make me look available. Why not?*

I yanked the door open, admitting his massive frame through the small gap before closing it behind him. I left my hand resting on the handle, closing my eyes and counting to ten before I turned around.

The king stood there, hair slung over his shoulders in wet curls, rivulets of water trailing down his bare chest. *He took a bath to wash her off. How thoughtful.* I smiled tentatively as I discreetly sniffed the air beside him, noting the musk of his manliness and a faint presence of mint, but nothing more. Satisfied, my feet moved to carry me over to my window, picking up my scroll from the table to give me a physical reminder or something comforting.

Staring at Ochus, my mind cycled through a familiar quote as I contemplated the man standing before me in my half-asleep state. I thought back to the plays of old, a familiar piece from Shakespeare rearing its head as I closed my eyes, longing for home.

*“A rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet.”*

Ochus looked at me with a quizzical expression, his brows furrowed as he studied the way I seemed to glide across the mosaic floor. I felt at home, even though my heart insisted I did not belong here. His hand rested lightly on the wall beside him as he sighed, running the other through his tousled black mane.

“What are you going on about now, little wren?”

I stamped my foot, hands on my hips as I glared at him, his sexy smirk only serving to enrage me further. “It’s from—”

My eyes fell to the colorful geometric stones beneath my feet, their uneven shapes a glaring reminder of my own imperfections. “It’s from a story we tell where...where I’m from.” My hands clutched the ornate scroll to my breast, the gold filigree and beautiful gems decorating the handle drawing his eyes. Ochus growled low in the back of his throat when he realized it was the same scroll he’d given me upon his return.

I cradled the scroll lovingly, almost like a child of my womb, as tears streamed down my face. His fingers itched to reach out to me, twitching as he fought the urge to wipe away those tears, but he knew I wouldn’t let him.

“What does it mean?”

I stopped pacing as he spoke, raising my eyes to his as I recited the familiar prose back to him.

*“‘What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet’.”* I gestured to him with a single hand as my other held the scroll close. “Your people, they call you Artaxerxes the third, they worship you. The women you own patronize you behind your back, but they bear your children and reap the benefits. To them, you are *king*, not known by your name but by your title. To your trusted friends and family, you are Ochus, a great man. So many different names, still only one man.”

His charming smile chipped away at my armor as I battled the raging emotions inside myself, wanting with all my heart to just give in and *live. Love*. But I just couldn’t.



*I don't belong here. Not in this time, not on this continent. Certainly not in the King of Persia's palace, as a concubine.*

The king scratched the stubble on his chin, weighing his words carefully. I had a love for words, wielding them like the sharpest sword, maiming with a single blow. If he chose the wrong words, I would use them to defend the weakening wall in my heart. The same one he fought valiantly to knock down.

“Who am I *to you*, little songbird? What do you call me, in the deep caverns of your heart? In the cover of the shadows in the darkness of night, what name rests on your lips as you watch me from your window on my nighttime trysts?”

My eyes widened in shock as he stalked forward like one of the dangerous, primal tigers he kept as pets. My feet moved of their own accord, backing towards the edge of the bed, seeking shelter from his penetrating eyes. His raspy voice was thick with desire, his eyes hooded as he gazed into my very soul, promising me the moon without saying a single word.

His voice was barely a whisper against the soft skin of my earlobe, yet it sent a shiver down my spine that I couldn't deny anymore.

*I wanted this man. Bad.*

“What do you cry out when you dream of me? When you imagine the things I would do to your body, if only you had asked...What pet name is on your lips as you touch yourself when you think no one can hear you?”

“I don't want to talk about it.”

When his hand reached up to brush against my bare forearm, I found myself letting down the last barrier I'd erected against his advances. His smile was disarming as he gazed into my eyes, drowning in the raw emotion and vulnerability just behind the surface I clung to keep intact. I felt so lost here, so out of place; my only source of knowledge was a book we'd been reading in anthropology and a ridiculously long, boring documentary on the Achaemenid Empire that I'd fallen asleep halfway through.

“I can't let you have my heart, Arty, we've been over this--”

"I wish you would call me something else, Roxani," he mumbled as his eyes narrowed, piercing me with his glare. I stood up to my full height, refusing to be intimidated as I smoothed the skirt of my dress.

"And I told *you* before; my name is Roxanne."

I turned away from him, intending to put space between us as I approached the window on the far wall. He stepped up behind me, letting his rough hands rest against the smooth skin of my shoulders. My body went rigid under his hands, fear coursing through me as I finally admitted to myself that this was certainly *not* a dream.

Somehow, I really *was* in ancient Persia, as a concubine of the king. I closed my eyes as his hands pulled me back against his body, every hair on my body on edge as my traitorous body reacted to his proximity. My bare skin rubbed against the rough hairs on his chest, and I squirmed as it tickled the small of my back.

"I will forever call you my Roxani. And here, behind these walls, behind these silk curtains that hide you from the rest of the world, I will be yours."

He lifted a hand from my shoulder to brush my chestnut locks over one shoulder, exposing my bare neck as I waited with bated breath, wanting more but not daring to ask.

"Let me love you, sweet songbird. Let me spend my days here with you, eating fruit from your fingers as you tell me more stories of this world you call 'home'. Let me take away the sadness that clouds your eyes as you gaze over the mountaintops in the distance."  
"

His kisses were like the light tickle of a feather against the hot skin on my neck, scattering my concentration as I realized what his words meant.

"Let me show you how to live for today; forget all your worries and sadness for a moment, let yourself be happy."

His hand blazed a trail down the side of my breast, along my ribcage, coming to rest against the natural, tiny swell of my abs.

“Let me give you *children*. Let me give you a family; help me build our future. Then, when we grow old together, we can sit around the flames of the fire and watch our grandchildren dancing in the shadows as we teach them the constellations in the stars.”

I choked back a sob, realizing with a sickening jolt that this man dreamed of things he would never get to see. He was so confident, so sure, so powerful, and yet...

Someone he trusted would kill him before he'd even begun to enjoy the peace he would eventually bring about.

He turned me around to face him, worry lining his face as I sobbed uncontrollably into his shoulder, my hands balled into fists against his chest. He held me as I spilled my sorrow onto him. My whole body shook from the force of my sadness, and every fiber of my being ached for him to take this pain from me.

I cried for what felt like hours. I cried for my family, who I would never see again. What would they think when I didn't return my mother's calls? Would my brother remember to take her to their father's grave on the anniversary of their wedding so that she can celebrate with him? Would my brother even miss me?

Would anyone notice I was gone at the apartment building I rented my tiny studio apartment in? Would they send notice after notice before deciding to evict me, throwing all my belongings to the curb for nonpayment? Would they call anyone, or was I just another stone beneath their feet, a loose pebble in an otherwise solid path?

*Did I matter to anyone in the grand scheme of things?*

Would it really be so bad just to accept the reality of the situation and give in to it? How much damage could I possibly do to one timeline if I let a king come to me every night, make me feel important, even if only for a moment? Surely accepting his advances wouldn't change the entire future of the world.

*Would it?*

We stood like statues in the center of my room as my sobs faded into hiccups and the jagged breaths my body fought to take in. Still, he held me, unwilling to let go as he basked in this small victory. I'd trusted him enough to let go, to grieve for my old life on his

shoulder. And this time, when his arms tugged my body against his, I didn't fight it.

His gaze followed the long line of my throat as I tilted my head back to lock eyes with him, a new sort of fire burning inside me. I brought my hands up to grasp his jaw firmly, dragging him down to my height to smash my lips hungrily against his.

I needed to feel like she mattered to someone for a moment. So why not let it be a king?



\* \* \*

Ochus broke off the kiss, moving to the fireplace as if I hadn't just poured my soul out to him and thrown myself at him like a full-force hurricane. He pointed to the furs, and I was eager to comply, wiggling beneath them quickly as he poked at the pathetic, cold ashes of the earlier fire. He chuckled, the sound like music to my ears. "You don't wake up when you're cold?"

I grumbled from beneath the blankets, which I'd pulled up to my nose. "I sleep pretty heavily. Only a few things that will wake me up."

"And what might those be?" he questioned, not bothering to turn around as he prepped the fire for revival.

"Well," I mused, "there's cold water. If you throw cold water at me, I'd probably get up quickly. And then there's tickling. I'm ticklish on my sides, so I wake up easily if I get tickled. And then there's—"

I stopped, realizing I was about to tell him sex would wake me up. He noticed my pause, his shoulders tensing as he, too, was affected as the fire roared to life, both figuratively and literally. I clenched my thighs, willing my rampant libido to calm itself. *Jesus, I almost fell into that hole, didn't I?*

Turning towards me, Ochus stood to his full height, towering over my kneeling form. *If he were to peel off those pants, I would be at the*

*perfect height to—*

*Woah, killer.*

*No means no. He was clear about that.*

Sighing, I scooted to one side of the bed, giving him room to sit down beside me. I rolled on my side, facing the wall resolutely as his weight joined mine on the soft furs, shuffling around as he removed his boots. I listened intently as first one, then the other, made a loud *thunk* on the marble floors, an audible sigh of relief leaving his lips and finding my ears.

And then he leaned back, stretching out on the furs as if he planned to remain here for the night.

*Shit.*

I had two options—ignore it or confront him. Somehow my brain had naïvely convinced me that his intentions had just been to come back and check my fire, and then leave again. I hadn't even allowed myself to think of the possibility that he might spend the night and not touch me.

*And of course, here we were.*

"Roxani?" he whispered from the other side of the bed. "You don't have to be afraid. I won't touch you tonight if you do not wish. But I will be sharing this fur with you, as I like being cold just about as much as you do."

I blinked, realizing that meant I would probably brush up against his chest at some point in the night. I gulped back my apprehension, rolling to face him. *If I was stuck in this situation, I might as well have a good view.*

His brows rose significantly when I faced him, but he said nothing, waiting for me to lead the conversation.

*I wasn't sure I knew what to say.*

Thankfully, he took away the need to come up with something. He propped his head up with his hand, his elbow bent out like the perfect pillow offering, and I knew if I scooted against him, my head would fit perfectly in the crook of that arm, and it would feel

*safe.* His voice was low and husky, setting sparks alive inside me. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

My lungs stopped working, my mind forgetting how to breathe. I sat there, stunned into complete paralysis at his apology. *Was this king, this god, apologizing to me?*

"You are a beautiful, strong, intelligent woman, and I do not want you to think me a monster. I do not know what drove me to dominate you on our joining night, but I have been ashamed of what I did to you ever since. That man was not who I am."

*I could not be hearing this. It was a dream, right?*

*Had to be.*

"I want you to trust me, I want you to come to me, but I want you to be willing. I do not wish you to do anything against your will. So until I have made you trust me again, until you come to me, willingly, I will not come to your silks for my pleasure."

*Oh.*

*Well, that was a bummer.*

"I'm flattered, A-Arty." His nose wrinkled up in a grimace as my nickname registered in his ear, and I couldn't bite back a barking laugh that had me rolling closer to him. By the time I realized I was practically touching him, I could feel the contented rumble of his laughter in the muscled chest in front of me. My laughter died in my throat as I suddenly felt my body reacting to his proximity, watching with horror as one of my hands seemed to move of its own accord to reach out and touch the tanned muscles that rippled beneath my fingers.

He sucked in a breath at my touch, his eyes hooded but still watching me intently.

"I very much appreciate your gallantry, and this is all very nice of you, but I don't want to put you out."

His brows came together in a frown as he stared at me, puzzlement in his lust-filled gaze. "Put me out? What do you mean by this? Surely you don't plan to make me leave?"

"No, no, it's a saying where I come from." *That's right, idiot, mess with the timeline some more.* "It means I don't want to be an inconvenience."

"An inconvenience? Is that what you think you are to me?"

I bit my lip, hands still on his chest as his eyes opened wide, a look of incredulity crossing his stony features. He wrapped those calloused fingers around one of my wrists, dragging it down the length of him until it covered his very erect manhood. "Does this feel like you're an inconvenience to me?" He released my hand, allowing me to withdraw it in shock.

*It seemed like an inconvenience that it wasn't inside me,* I thought, chuckling at my stupid jokes. But no matter how badly I wanted to say them, my mouth wouldn't cooperate, so I just sighed instead, a blush warming my cheeks as I tried to hide my face.

"Trust me when I say it is not difficult to have you as a wife. It is difficult to have you and not be able to fill you with my seed, but I am confident you will come to love me."

*Love? What the hell? Awful fast men around here.* "One thing at a time, buddy. I've never loved anyone who wasn't related to me before."

He seemed so sure of himself as he brushed my hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear as he smiled down at me. "Then I will be the first. It will bring me great pride to have won your heart before anyone else."

"Good luck," I muttered.

I closed my eyes, trying to force my racing heart to calm itself enough to let me sleep, but nothing was working. I scooted closer to Ochus when the cold started to seep under the furs, but it still wasn't enough. I was restless, and I couldn't understand why my mind wouldn't just shut down. After tossing and turning against Ochus's side for more than an hour, I felt him get up to throw more wood on the fire, thinking me cold. When he came back to bed, he snaked up against my backside, spooning me as a thick forearm draped lazily over my midsection.

I felt trapped but also warm and safe. My mind calmed somewhat

when I felt his breathing even out, and I tried to ignore the apparent erection pressing against the curve of my ass, reminding me there was a whole-ass, virile male behind me.

*What a great night this would end up being.*



# Chapter 19

~Artaxerxes III~

*Never before had I spent an entire night with a woman while fully clothed.* But the night with Roxani was exceptional, and though I yearned to put my hands on every part of her excitable figure, I would respect her wishes. I'd sent off to a contact in Athens to look into her claims of being sold against her will, but they would likely be months just doing the needed research. In the meantime, I needed to convince her to trust me fully. To love me.

I glanced down at Roxani beside me, curled sideways in the pile of pillows and satin sheets, her arms wrapped firmly around a small, red pillow. *Oh, to be a pillow in her arms.* A wistful sigh escaped my lips as I envisioned a day when she would wrap herself around *me* like that, welcoming her king home from a long stint away on campaign with the soldiers. A *true* king never asked his warriors to do anything he was unwilling to do, so I would stand beside my men in any battle, no matter how big or small. I reached out to caress her cheek softly, enjoying the feel of her smooth skin beneath my hand. I wanted to plant kisses along her jaw and down to where her collarbones met the base of her throat. I wanted to pepper her with kisses until she couldn't stand it anymore. I wanted to cover her lips with my own and swallow every cry of protest she had until she battled me back like the warrior I knew she would be.

I wanted to know everything about this mysterious creature that had shown up on my doorstep. I'd held her while we slept, my arms around her to keep her warm. Her long hair flowed freely down her back, and I buried my face in her luscious, smooth locks, memorizing the heady scent of vanilla on her mahogany locks.

She was a beauty, and I was one lucky man to have her. The crowning jewel in my empire, this exotic creature, and all mine, to boot. What had I done to please the gods so? *I must pay a visit to the temple soon to give thanks for such a boon.* She stirred in her sleep

and pulled the pillow tighter against her, causing me to chuckle at her innocence.

*If only I could be as carefree.*



\* \* \*

~Roxani~

I had been in the middle of the best dream of my life before my subconscious decided to intervene. The table was set with the fine china we used on the holidays or when company comes to visit. The special forks supposedly only for salad but looked indistinguishable from the regular forks sat *just so* next to each plate. The starched white tablecloth was just slightly off-center as my mother stood at the end of the table, rearranging the damnable thing. A hint of rosemary and sage drifted through the air as I closed my eyes, inhaling deeply. I missed mom's big chicken dinners. The fluffy, thick mashed potatoes drenched in her homemade chicken gravy from the pan drippings; the fresh veggies with only the slightest hint of salt and pepper to enhance the flavor of good produce. I could survive off these meals alone, and the conversation was guaranteed to be warm and friendly. Nothing ever felt forced, and everyone was happy.

But my dream quickly flipped into a nightmare as I realized I'd never really analyzed our dinners together; I'd always seen them through the eyes of an eager child, happy to have a good meal on the table and talk on the phone with my friends before bed. But as an adult, I could see all the things I'd never stopped to really *see*. The way my mother's hands shook as she smoothed the white cloth at the corners, or her stooped posture as she moved from seat to seat, straightening the plates of each place setting though they were already even. The way my brother, as he got older, had started hiding things, speaking less and less at the dinners until we hardly noticed that he didn't speak at all. His face had begun to break out from acne, but it was actually due to the drugs he'd fallen in with.

When he was straight, sober, there were hints of his old self again, but they were often overshadowed by the anxious, antsy behavior of someone involved with illegal misdeeds. His presence at the house always guaranteed something of monetary value would come up missing when he left, and mom had started hiding her purse before dinner.

The perfect image in my mind had been distorted by time, and I'd never noticed before now how badly things had deteriorated. How the dinners I'd once eagerly anticipated now brought me such deep dread. I shuddered, feeling like I was fading into a fog as the scene before me warped to reflect the accurate picture I'd been whitewashing in my mind. My brother's face was gaunt, his cheeks sunken in and deep purple bags hanging beneath his eyes as if he'd seen a hundred years instead of twenty-five. My mother's back was curved, her steps shaky and uneven as she reached out to hold onto things when she moved around. Her frustrated sighs echoed around the room at intervals, and as I watched her circle the table again, I realized she forgot she'd already done it. The occasional episodes were getting worse and happening more frequently. She was probably developing Alzheimer's, which was one more bill the insurance probably wouldn't cover.

*Why had I ever wanted to go back to this? My life was falling apart at home; here, I could have the chance to start over and make anything I want to happen. I could have everything I'd never been allowed to have before. I would be able to breathe without worrying about how the bills would get paid or where my next meal would come from.*

*But what would happen to my mother? To my brother? Would their reality cease to exist, replaced by the one I was in right now? Would they actually exist in this time, the universe's sick joke in all this?*

I felt the hair on my arms stand on end as I stood on the outside of this picturesque memory, looking in at what I wanted most right now--familiarity. Absently running my hands up and down my biceps, I tried to chase the slight tickle away, to no avail. My brow scrunched together as I frowned, trying to wrack my brain for the source of this strange sensation. It almost felt like someone was caressing my arm, but I was all alone here, trapped in this suspended time in my brain, my locked away memories.

I stamped my foot, shivering at the feeling against my skin as I tried to make heads or tails of it, or at least make it stop, but neither worked, and I sighed, closing my eyes against the light flow of static electricity that moved up and down my arms where someone's hand would be.

When I opened my eyes again, I was back in the queen's compound, surrounded by silks and pillows. I laid on my side, my hands around a small red pillow as I clenched it tightly to my chest. Behind me, I heard a deep chuckle break the quiet atmosphere.

"I was hoping you'd wake soon. How did you sleep, little tigress?"

His fingers trailed up and down the back of my arm, and I laughed with him as I realized where the sensation in my dream had come from.

*I even reacted to this man in my sleep.*

I stretched my arms out above my head, groaning as my spine cracked back into its familiar position of stress compression. "I slept fine, uh, thanks."

His hand stilled against my arm, and I had to bite back a groan. I had been enjoying the sensation far more than I realized. He sat up, pulling me from my prone position to meet his gaze. His hands didn't release mine, pulling them between us to hold them as he spoke.

"I will be leaving soon to see to a branch of my troops on campaign across the empire. You will be safe here in my absence. I wish to spend as much time as possible with you before I embark on my journey. Will you do me the honor of accompanying me to the Temple of Mithra today?"

I frowned thoughtfully, wracking my brain for any clue as to what he was talking about. I could recall bits and pieces but not much, and I just hoped my claim to Athenian citizenship was enough to excuse my ignorance of his deities.

"This Mithra is your god?"

His eyes sparkled with delight as he turned his million-watt smile on me, disarming any and all thought as he chuckled at me. "We

have but one true god, and that is Ahura Mazda, the supreme creator. But Mithra is the lesser divinity of contracts and the embodiment of justice. I appealed to him before becoming king to deliver a queen to me, and he has delivered. So I must pay my respects and show my appreciation for such a gift in a religious ceremony, and it would be the greatest honor if you would accompany me."

His excited tone betrayed his devotion to his religion, and I shivered at the feel of his rough accent as it rang out to my foreign ears. I'd missed half of what he had said, and something in my brain rang warning bells frantically, but I couldn't be bothered with them at the moment.

Those words stunned me speechless; my lips parted in blatant shock at his invitation. I couldn't make words form, and my brain was tripping over itself. Finally, I cleared my throat, settling for a shaky nod in answer.

The intensity of his gaze made me feel as if I was burning alive, so I glanced away, focusing on the beautiful view outside my window instead. "I would be honored to accompany you to your temple."

His wide grin and bright eyes betrayed his pleasure with my agreement, and he proceeded to bound around the room as I laughed from my place on the floor. Sometimes, it was the little things that brought us happiness, and if this was what pleased him, so be it.



\* \* \*

We stood before the temple of Mithra, the tall marble pillars cutting designs in the rays of the sun that beat down upon it. The dirt beneath our feet stirred gently as we disturbed it with our slow steps, moving beneath the high ceilings of the clay rooftop. Inside the temple's doors stood a man adorned with long, heavy chains atop some of the finest silks and satins. Wordlessly he shuffled before us, leading the king and myself down a long hallway to a

dimly lit room. In the center of this darkness sat a raised platform, upon which a small stack of wood sat. Ochus followed my eyes to the timber pile, realizing for the first time that I had no idea what was going on.

Thankfully, he explained.

"The wood is a pyre, for a burning ceremony to call upon the god Mithra. Once we have worshipped his grace and appeased his reciprocity, we shall retreat from his sanctum and wash our feet in the holy waters of the pools of purity."

I nodded, at a loss for words, as he tugged me down with him to the stone floor below, kneeling before the platform as the man from before approached with a lit torch. When his hand brought the flame down to the dried wood, he lit a fierce blaze that lit up the room around us. In the warm light of the fire, our skin was bathed in a deep orange glow, the warmth seeping into my body as the chanting began. I couldn't understand the words, but the sound was enchanting, the repetitive ululations echoing off the walls as a deep calm settled over us all. Ochus prostrated himself on the ground before the flames, bowing to something only he understood.

I was handed a goblet of some strangely enticing liquid, which the man gestured at me to raise to my lips. Unsure how much to imbibe, I opted for a sip, the somewhat familiar flavor of what tasted like red wine painting my lips. Happy to taste something familiar, I quickly took another few gulps of the liquid, letting the smooth fruity flavor tickle the back of my throat.

Ochus reached out to take the goblet from me, bringing it to his lips for a tiny sip before handing it off to the shaman. I was suddenly rethinking my decision to slake my thirst on the wine. Maybe it had some sort of medicinal properties?

The chanting continues as Ochus pulled me down to bow before the flames, joining in the chant. I stayed silent, but the edges of my vision were getting a bit shaky as if the picture were a bunch of waves on the ocean in my mind.

*There was definitely something in that wine. Shit.*

*"Ohm da la nei ol partach someni al duranda, telo ma quenta.*

*Ahhhhhhn..."*

Whatever they were saying was not in a language I could understand, so I simply watched as the room began to spin, the darkness closing in on me as I swayed from side to side, colors and shapes blending in with one another until nothing made sense and everything made sense at once. I couldn't tell you up from down, but I wasn't in a condition to argue the point or try and stop it. I was along for the ride in this strange ritual, and I had nothing to hold onto to keep afloat. The last thing I could remember before the world went black was Ochus wrapping his arms around me, crying out my name as I leaned sideways and fell to the floor on my side.

*"Roxanii!"*



\* \* \*

*The air is thick and heavy with humidity so intense I feel like I am drowning, but I'm unable to move forward or back, stuck forever in this suspended time I don't recognize. Scanning the room, I can see a figure in the distance, his countenance large and imposing at first. His bright orange clothing and bare feet stood in stark contrast to his bushy beard and wild hair, silk pants whipping around his legs as he approached me. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came out, and I wondered if this was all part of some enormous hallucination.*

*I blinked, and the man was suddenly in front of me, his hand outstretched to touch my forehead. My brain was immediately assaulted with image after image of myself, images from this time, and my own. Me, holding my brother in a quick embrace as we stood at the side of our father's graveside. My mother holding my hands as she saw me off to college. My father's smile as he pushed me on the swings.*

*Then I could see myself clearly, wearing clothing from this time period, my body locked in a passionate embrace in the arms of the king himself. I saw us briefly tussling around on the bedding in my chambers, neither of us in clothes. I saw myself with a swollen, rounded belly, beaming as I cradled the future of the king in my stomach. Finally, I saw an image of*

*Ochus holding a small boy on his shoulders as they walked down a cobbled street.*

*"You know, Anahita, you are one difficult woman to track down when you don't want to be found."*

*The voice sounded so familiar and yet so strange; the melodic sound too high pitched for the burly man it escaped. But his lips had never moved, leaving me more confused than when I found myself here.*

*"Who are you? And who is Anahita?" I sought answers, and maybe this strange figure could give them to me.*

*His portly frame shook with his silent laughter. "You were once a goddess of these people. You were forgotten with the old texts. But your people need you, and the king cannot be a true leader unless he learns to trust you and his faith again. So he asked for a queen, and what better queen than the goddess he has shunned to bring him a hint of humility and touch him deeper than anyone else could?"*

*"I think you have made a mistake," I pleaded. "I am not from here--"*

*"I know very well where you have come from, Roxanne. You are from the future, but your spirit is that of my other half, the goddess of fertility and wisdom. You have the wonderful gift of knowledge of our time before we ourselves have experienced it, and I have spent—will spend—the next two thousand years searching for you to bring you back here where you are needed most."*

*I shook my head, more confused now than I had ever been in my life. "But I am not this Anahita deity. I am just an ordinary woman with a less-than-perfect life. I just want to go home."*

*"Ah, that's the catch, my dear," he mused in my head. "You cannot go home to your own time until you have fulfilled your duty here. You must restore the people's faith in you and help lead the king down his righteous path. Once you've completed your tasks, you may choose to return to your own time, if that is what you wish."*

*"I do not understand. Why me?"*

*His frown wasn't reassuring as he absently scratched at his beard. "Well, I wouldn't be able to tell you. But, for some reason, your soul chose this body. And who am I to argue with the goddess of wisdom?"*



*He started to fade from vision, and I reached out to grab ahold of his shirt. Unfortunately, it slipped from my grasp as he dissolved into thin air. I flailed my arms wildly, wishing he would come back and help me.*

*"Come back! Please, I don't understand!"*

*As the last of him melted away into the air around me, a slight chuckle carried along the breeze with a parting message.*

*"Your time here may be brief or may be everlasting. So, forget when you came from and why you are here. Only you can make the decision. Only you can save Persia; only you can save the king."*

*But how would I save a king if I didn't even know who I was?*

# Chapter 20

~Artaxerxes III~

*Had the elixir been too potent? Had she taken too much? So many thoughts raced through my mind as I scrambled to lift her into my lap. Had I angered Mithra? Was she the wrong choice?*

"Priest! She needs help! Call for my guards!" I barked out commands as I cradled her lifeless body in my arms, panic starting to set in. I *couldn't* lose her.

The older man hurried over to me, a different goblet in his hands this time. "Here, give her this. It should help negate the seer's sage in the wine." He frowned down at Roxani's still form, watching as her chest rose and fell agonizingly slow. The concoction had slowed her body down, and she was unresponsive. I had never had such an ill effect from the ritualistic drink before, but I could feel the edges of my vision coming unhinged and wobbling slightly as I realized I was in no shape to care for her.

"H-howmuch didzhou...put in thewine..."

My speech sounded frighteningly slurred, and I finally recognized this for what it was--an attempt on my life. "*Guardzzz!*" I yelled, hoping against hope I could trust the few who came. The older man had started feeding the drink to Roxani, and I reached out to stop him, my arm flailing weakly as it came nowhere near its intended target. My guard knelt on my left, leaning in to hear me. I struggled to convey the message he needed to ensure we were taken care of.

"Sir! Your Highness, what happened?"

"Druuu..." I shook my head dizzily, trying again. "Drugged me...and...and *her*." I glanced over to Roxani, happy to see another guard lifting her from the ground before carrying her off. I groaned as I felt my body reject the salvia in the drink, and I leaned to the side, heaving as if my life depended on it.

The less poison in my body, the better. As soon as I'd given up all my body had to give, I felt somewhat like myself again. My head wasn't as clouded, my vision not as blurry as I glanced around me. "Help me up! I must go with..." As I stood, my legs decided to tell me they weren't quite ready to move by collapsing beneath me. I leaned on my guards for support, struggling to move forward as they balanced me on their shoulders. Thankfully they had the common sense to follow the guard carrying my queen--I didn't have the energy or the ability to correct them should they have chosen a different route.

They took us straight to my healers in the palace, and I watched on helplessly as they worked on Roxani. She still hadn't moved, and salvia didn't usually have long-term side effects. She should have at least woken up by now--

A loud gasp rang out as Roxani's still form breathed life back into itself, sitting upright immediately as she gripped the sides of the table she sat upon. Her eyes were wild and confused, scanning the room for anything familiar. And then they settled on me, and I watched her visibly relax. Her whole body slumped, and she looked like she'd had the wind knocked out of her. I watched helplessly as the healers fussed around her, checking her as she continued to sit there hunched over, her whole body shaking.

The tables we sat on were no more than a few feet apart, and I reached out to her, taking her hand in mine. She dragged her eyes over to mine, the lifeless look inside them scaring me almost as much as her silence. Her lips were moving, but no sound came out as she stared through me, looking at something I couldn't see. Something that wasn't there.

*A vision.*

I *knew* I hadn't chosen wrong, and Mithra must have given her a vision to show her the truth. Eventually, a faint whisper escaped her lips, and she finally focused in on my eyes as all the color drained from her face. She looked like she'd seen a ghost. I leaned in to try and listen to the words, but they were so faint I wasn't sure I was hearing her right.

*"Ana...hi...ta..."*

There was no way I'd heard her correctly. She knew nothing about our religion; she'd said as much before. So how was it that she was mumbling the name of a long-forgotten goddess in her trance?

"Roxani, can you hear me?" She stared blankly at me, but she didn't break eye contact, so I knew she was listening. "Roxani, we've been drugged. I'm going to have us escorted back to my quarters so we can recover. The side effects should wear completely off soon. Are you alright?"

She didn't move at first, her eyes watering at the corners. *Was she crying?* I watched her intently until I noticed the slightest movement of her chin. It was such a faint movement that I barely noticed it. But it was there. She understood. *Thank the gods.* I called for the guards, explaining my demands. Before I knew it, Roxani was being lifted by none other than Bagoas himself, then eunuch flashing me a sly grin before leading the way out of the room. Outside the temple, we found horses waiting, and he lifted Roxani onto one, wrapping her arms around the horse's neck.

"Can you ride, Ochus?"

Bagoas was the only person not married to me who could get away with calling me that. I nodded, wanting to save any energy I had for the ride ahead. He nodded back, mounting behind Roxani to lead the way. When he moved to turn towards the queen's residence, I spurred my horse forward, motioning for him to follow. He remained silent until we arrived in the palace's stables, his eyes reflecting a confused expression.

"Why here?"

"Because," I shrugged, "she's safer with me. We were drugged today, and I would feel safer if we get to the bottom of it while she's in my company. "

"Understandable," he said, nodding. Bagoas knew when to leave things alone, and he walked away from that veritable minefield, Roxani in his arms as he followed me into the palace, the giant archway feeling less welcoming than usual today.



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

It had been almost a week since the ritual, and I hadn't been able to bring up the hallucination with Ochus since that night. I needed to explain, but I was afraid I wouldn't be able to. Worse still, what if they thought I was crazy? I couldn't afford to get locked up in a place like this. And how was I supposed to help the king?

He'd brought us back to his quarters in the palace, and I'd slept almost three days straight before being lucid enough to speak again. I'd spent the last few days watching Bagoas and Ochus come and go, preparing the king to ride out with a guard to join his campaigning army. Those plans had been delayed after the incident at the temple, and I felt guilty because of it. The king clearly worried over me. I was *not* looking forward to his departure, as I wasn't sure I could deal with being here alone, but the king had promised I would be safe. Bagoas would ensure I was well-cared for in his absence.

Still, I had more questions than answers and nobody to help me make heads or tails of anything. To think I was a goddess, supposedly, and I'd been reborn to save an empire. Who would have imagined the bookish woman in the back of the classroom lecture would turn out to be something so incredible?

I planned to talk to Bagoas today, as he promised to take me out to the veranda to enjoy the nice weather. He had the king's right ear, and he'd been so helpful and attentive when I was recovering. Then, as if by thinking of him had somehow summoned him to the door, I heard a knock on the other side of the thin wood. Bagoas's light, pleasant tone rang out.

"Heyo, Roxani! Ready to go today? The gathering is alive with activity!"

"Yeah, yeah, keep your shorts on. I'm ready, Bagoas." I swung the

door open, smiling widely at my friend. He led me out of the palace, heading straight for the verandah where the women gathered.



\* \* \*

The gathering was teeming with life today, as it was Dido's birthday. She sat among a group of other women, opening gifts and chatting away like a queen at court. I smiled, tucking my package behind my back. I'd decided last minute to gift her the golden-yellow gown she'd eyed since I had last worn it. Her kind eyes and welcoming wave drew me in towards her clique, and I settled in as I handed her the poorly-wrapped gift, getting comfortable on the scattered pillows.

She'd rushed off not long after opening all her gifts and had reappeared wearing my gown, so I knew she adored it more than any of her other gifts. This knowledge brought me joy, as so few things in my daily life did. When the party was over, I found myself being herded off by Layla and Bagoas, and instead of being shuffled back to the king's rooms in the palace, we arrived at the queen's compound, in front of my own doors. Confused, I pulled my key from the braided cord around my neck, slowly slipping it into the lock.

When I walked in, I was greeted with a fantastic sight. My room had been transformed, shelves now lining an entire wall on one side. My bed was raised off the floor, and a platform built to accommodate my sleeping furs. Someone had replaced all the pillows with a somewhat comfortable base mat, and I ran my hand along the edge of it, testing its firmness. I moved from the bed to the table that sat along one wall; a chair tucked neatly beneath it. On the shelf, dead-center of my room, sat my Plato and Socrates scrolls, things I treasured more than anything in this world. In my time, I would never have been able to afford such luxuries, but now, in this time, I had a wealthy king bankrolling me with lavish gifts and a nearly-bottomless purse.

*And yet, I was still determined to get home. For what? What awaited me there that was better than this time period had to offer me?*

I moved around the room, barely noticing when Bagoas and Layla silently snuck away, permitting entrance to another figure in their absence.

Until he spoke, and his voice set my blood to racing, a heat pooling low in my stomach at the raspy, lustful sound.

"I hope you like your new quarters."

I turned, eyeing the shirtless man in my room, his muscular frame seeming to take up half the empty space in the room. His broad shoulders flexed as he stretched his arms wide, gesturing at the additions to my sleeping quarters. "You have a place to keep all the lovely gifts I will bring you, and when those shelves fill up, I shall build you more."

A pang of guilt shot through my heart at his declaration. *This man was still making up for the past. It had been nearly a month, and he still feared I would never come to love him.*

I swallowed the lump in my throat, my movements jerky as I approached him, my arms at my sides. When I stood no less than a foot from his dominant frame, I wrapped my arms around his middle, hugging him close to me, breathing in his scent. "This makes me happy. Thank you, Arty."

I felt his hands still at his nickname, but he quickly shook off the reaction, smiling down at me with a look of adoration. "It is my greatest wish to see you happy. I am glad to be the cause of your pleasure."

I melted at his words, realizing I'd already forgiven this man for what had happened between us. I knew he would never stop trying to make up for it, and that fact saddened me to my core. *How could I show him all was forgiven?*

I sat on the edge of the bed as he moved towards the fireplace, preparing to stoke flames to life and give me warmth that I so desperately needed at night. I watched his muscles ripple as he adjusted the wood in the stone hollow, his skin a beautiful bronze shade even in the moonlight from the window and the low glow

from candles he'd lit around the room. When the fire was stoked and roaring fiercely, I smiled in anticipation, knowing I would need every bit of my fortitude to do what I planned to do tonight.

*I planned to give myself to him.*

As Ochus stood, turning to face me, I clenched my fists in the bedding, my heart pounding loud enough it wouldn't surprise me if he could hear it beating against my ribcage. He moved to close the distance between us, his lips parted slightly as he drank his fill of my appearance. He reached out to take one of my hands in his own, standing less than a foot from my kneeling position on the pallet. The pad of his thumb trailed lazily over my knuckles, dragging with it a familiar sensation that rocked me to my core with its intensity.

*Lust.*

"Roxani," he whispered, his gorgeous, shining eyes meeting mine, "I would give you more pleasure, if you would have it."

I squirmed beneath his piercing gaze, afraid to make a sound. I just hoped he took my silence for an invitation.

He pulled me to my feet, moving to lead me over to the chair that sat beside the table. He pulled it out, motioning towards the table. "Please, have a seat."

I moved to sit in the chair, but his quick hands jerked me out of it, setting me atop the table as he replaces me in the wooden seat. Now, I was curious, but also excited. A heat ran through my blood at the position I found myself in, and I felt the ache within me grow as Ochus's hands rested gently on my knees, inching them apart. Before he had bared me to his gaze, he froze, his finger trailing in little, lazy circles along the tender skin of my thighs. I shivered at his touch, my need growing. I ached for him to keep touching me, but I could not bring myself to say the words yet.

*Why not?*

Ochus leaned in towards me, pressing insistently at my thighs to part for him. I obeyed his silent command, spreading those legs for him as he ran his hands up my skirt, his fingers meeting tender, wet flesh that ached to be touched, caressed, *fucked*. I sucked in a breath as his finger slid up and down my dripping slit, prodding between



my tender folds until he found a motion that had me tilting back, hands braced behind me, hips coming off the table in an effort to get closer.

My mewls of muted pleasure only seemed to drive him on as he leaned in, shoving my skirt to my waist, his hands cupping my ass from beneath as he lowered his lips to my soft core. His tongue replaced his fingers as he painstakingly explored and tasted every inch of my eager pussy.

*Gods, the things he could do with his tongue. Astrid had been right—he needed no education in the bedroom, that was for sure.*

I moaned wantonly atop that table as his tongue flicked across my swollen, slick heat, undoing me as he held me still, drinking his fill and stoking me higher and higher until I was practically begging for release.

"Ohhh, yes, please." I couldn't form much coherent thought, and his fingers slipped inside me as his tongue continued to lick at my sensitive nub. When he switched to a gentle sucking, I came undone, his fingers hitting that spot in me Astrid had awoken weeks before. I felt my juices drench his hand and face between my legs as my body was wracked with uncontrollable, nearly-unbearable tremors, my soul ripping from my earthly shell and ascending to the heavens.

If this was what his lips promised, I would gladly crawl into bed with him every day of the week just for the chance to feel this world-shattering bliss that his body could give me.

"That's right, Roxani, let your body sing for me. Cut loose and enjoy this. Find your release. Cum for me, tigress."

He licked my thighs clean as his head withdrew from between my legs, a satisfied smile on his lips. I felt the warmth of my blush creeping up my body, all the way from my toes, as I sat there, sprawled atop a table, dripping from between my legs, spent and sated as a king gazed down with satisfaction at my throbbing cunt.

It was all I could do not to moan at the sheer eroticism of it all.

So I was thoroughly puzzled when he helped me into bed, adding some fuel to the fire before promising to be back soon and tucking

me beneath the furs.

*Why was he leaving?*

I pondered his absence all night as I drifted off into a fitful sleep, my body still occasionally shivering with residual pleasure.

*Tonight would be a long night.*

# Chapter 21

~Artaxerxes III~

I would not take her yet. She seemed eager, ready, and willing, but I still wondered if it was from an actual reconciliation or if she genuinely forgave me. I also understood women had needs much like men, so I gave her the release her body so craved, wondering if I had made a mistake in leaving.

I could have convinced her to roll with me in the new bed she now lay in, dirtying the furs with my seed as it filled her, spilling out from the fullness of her hole. I could imagine the way she would writhe beneath me, her moans permeating the air as mine joined her, echoing off the walls. But I tucked her in bed instead, and now I was on the hunt for a quick partner for the night, the smell of Roxani's sex still in my days-old stubble as I wandered the halls of the quarters, veering off into the concubine wing.

I paused before I passed through the arch separating the concubines from the wives, my gut clenching in a feeling foreign to me.

*Was this guilt?*

Why should I feel guilty for seeking my pleasures elsewhere? After all, everyone, Roxani included, knew I had many wives, concubines, and slaves of the flesh. Surely she would not fault me for taking a partner.

Somehow, something in my gut told me I was wrong. I shoved the feeling to the back of my mind, coming across a familiar shadow leaning against the far wall.

I needed not speak a word; the concubine knew why I was there. She pounced on the opportunity, crooking a finger at me as she led the way into the garden, where many late-night trysts happened.

I played the scene over in my head a thousand times from the last time I'd found myself in these gardens, seeking relief of the flesh

after promising Roxani I would give her time. My mind kept sneaking back to the shadows I'd seen moving in her window as I'd glanced around after spending myself across the nameless woman's back. I'd used her as a willing hole to fuck, nothing more.

*To soothe my soul, there was only one woman—Roxani.*

I needed her in the worst way, and I absently rubbed against the stiffness in my trousers as the concubine whose name I had forgotten sank to her knees, freeing my shaft one second and bobbing her head dutifully on it the next. I blew a load into her deep throat and another across her chest as she used her perky breasts to jerk me to completion. Then, somewhat sated, I made for the baths, washing as I had the time before, taking care to remove all traces of the concubine's scent from my body.

I hated the cloying perfumes some of the women wore, the intensity of them almost maddening. It choked me at times, which is why I didn't often spend time in the women's quarters when seeking pleasure from them.

But the scent Roxani had worn when I'd come home . . . it had been like heaven, just enough of it lingering on her body to tease a man, and I'd wanted to drag my tongue across her body until I had covered every inch of her skin.

*This woman would be my downfall if I didn't fuck her soon.*

After cleaning off, I returned to Roxani's room, letting my hair dry beside her fire as I added a few pieces of wood, ensuring she would stay warm throughout the night. She didn't wake when I slid into the bed next to her, wrapping my arm around her possessively as I pulled our bodies together.

*She was mine, and nobody would take her from me. Of this, I would make certain.*



I awoke to a dull ache between my legs, and absently I rolled over, seeking the warmth that had been against my back moments ago. My fingers connected with the hard planes of a muscled chest, and I froze, wondering if I'd imagined him leaving last night.

He'd come back at some point, and from the looks for the still-burning fire, he'd made sure it would keep me warm all night. A sense of satisfaction flowed through me as I stretched like a cat, working the kinks out carefully on my side of the bed. When the lumbering figure in the bed next to me stirred, I froze, still very much unaccustomed to waking up with a king beside me.

His eyes blinked the sleep away slowly, his head rotating to focus those gorgeous eyes on me. "Good morning, Roxani. Have you slept well?"

I chuckled, the irony of his question hitting me comedically. *Of course, it was hard not to sleep well when you're rocked by an intense orgasm, and a strong man holds you in his arms all night.* Still, he waited for a reply, so I shrugged noncommittally. "I slept fine, thanks."

His brows furrowed, but he said nothing, slipping from the furs to locate his pants, which I only just noticed he'd removed to sleep last night.

*So I'd been sleeping next to a completely naked, muscular god, and I hadn't even known it. Damn, talk about a missed opportunity.* I admired his toned backside as he slipped his tight pants on, doing up the laces on the leather in the front. "It's early; you should go back to sleep. I must leave for the front lines with the men but will be back in a month's time. Maybe less. I promise you won't even realize I'm gone before I come back."

I seriously doubted that was true, but I chose to say nothing in response, offering a slight nod in return.

He couldn't see me as he was still facing away, but he continued as if silence equaled agreement. "I wish I could lounge around in the silks with you a bit longer, but I cannot keep the soldiers waiting. You should take full advantage of the still-roaring fire and enjoy the

warmth, sneak in a few more hours of sleep before your handmaiden comes knocking to rouse you.”

He'd made a sort of truce with Layla while I was recovering from the poisoning, and he would send a guard to fetch her when he left my side, so she could return and keep me company. I had no idea whose bed she was roused from or how they always managed to find her, but I rolled with it, happy with the results. Layla never seemed to mind, so I brushed my concerns aside, knowing I had a knack for overthinking things.

I watched the caged tiger of a man pace in my room as he tied his hair back, coming to my bed to brush a kiss against my lips before tucking me back in, ensuring I was warm upon his departure. Then, with a promise to bring me something rare and exciting back from his travels, he disappeared through my doorway, his shirt still hung over the back of my chair from the night before.

This time, I left it there, knowing I would be cuddling it when the separation from this tempting king got to be too much to bear.



\* \* \*

It had been more than a month now since Ochus's departure, and I worried every day that he wouldn't return from the war. A dark cloud settled over me, one that didn't seem to hold sway over the other women as they went on with their daily lives, not a mention once about the missing king, who should have been back by now.

*Why was nobody worried?*

I frowned as I stood from my seat in the corner of the verandah, where a large gathering of women danced to the musical stylings of a lute player, all smiles and cheers and waves. I was not in the mood for such frivolity. My mind was scattered, worried, and desolate.

I'd been turning Astrid away for a week or more now, her sessions

not holding the spark they once did. I wasn't sure if it was because of my current mood or if I was losing interest in her and I, so to be fair, I asked her for time, which she wasn't eager to give me. Still, she respected my wishes, and I had seen her sneaking around Dido's room a lot more often lately.

I made it back to the gardens, where a couple sat on the far side of the bushes, well out of earshot. Picking out a secluded bench, I planted my ass firmly on the stone slab, wishing for once I could just make this feeling go away for a little while. I felt the ache in my core again as my mind wandered to the image that had been burned in my mind of Ochus's face between my thighs, spread out on a table like a four-course meal as he devoured me gleefully.

Glancing around to make sure nobody could see me, I slipped a hand inside of my harem pants from the slit on my thigh, my fingers tangling in my thick curls that guarded my sweet, throbbing center. My fingers were no replacement for a good, hard fucking, and I wondered if Ochus would be home soon to avow me of this urge, this need that burned me alive from the inside out.

Just as I worked up the courage to slide a finger inside myself, a familiar voice echoed out from the trees behind me, sending a little thrill down my spine.

"You know, if it's pleasure you seek, release you need, you should let me take care of that for you in a more private setting."

Bagoas's blonde curls bounced around his face as his megawatt smile disarmed me, his hand trailing down my arm. The same arm connected to the hand which I was now too afraid to move.

Bagoas sat beside me on the stone bench, his eyes scanning our surroundings much like I had when I arrived. Finding the small number of people around to be satisfactory, he trailed his fingers lower until they reached my wrist, where the edge of my pants started. I swallowed thickly as his hand moved to cover mine, finding a digit still inside my pulsing core. I dare not move for fear of being seen, but Bagoas looked so nonchalant as he snuck his hand down to yank my finger from the tight hole I had buried it in, replacing it with two of his own deft digits. I bit my lip to keep from crying out with pleasure at the sensation, his fingers exploring

inside me as I inched my thighs apart, offering him better access.

He worked his fingers in and out of me until I moaned into his shoulder, leaning my head against his slender frame as he coaxed me nearly to completion in this open-air tryst.

“Oh, *fuck, Bagoas*, nghhh,” I mewled, my faint, restrained cries of pleasure growing in intensity as his thumb gently rubbed against my clit, making me squirm uncontrollably as his hand moved between my legs. Then, just as I thought I would finally reach the peak and be granted the sweet release I so craved, his hand withdrew, wiping my juices on the side of his tunic before yanking me to my feet.

“Why don’t I show you something that will cheer you right up, Roxani?” he growled, making his voice just loud enough that it wouldn’t seem suspicious to walk off with him.

We got a few side glances as he grabbed my hand, tugging me along towards a place I’d never been before. Down a few small corridors between buildings, I stopped when we arrived at a door that was so inconspicuous, I’d have never known it was there. I still couldn’t fathom it was a door until Bagoas pressed a slight indentation with his hand and the section of wall swung open, revealing what must be his private quarters here in the compound.

He pulled me quickly inside, sliding the stone panel back into place before lighting a lantern hanging from the wall. I hadn’t moved from the spot where I’d stopped upon entering, and he gently guided me to the next room, where a circular sleeping mat lay in the center of the room, covered in what looked like lion’s fur.

He lay on his back among the pelts, beckoning me to join him with a crooked finger. His lips curled up in a smile as I sank beside him, my sex throbbing at the promise of release.

Bagoas had stolen touches here and there while the king was away, but I’d never given in to his attentions, and he’d never pushed it. But something about today, about the way I pulsed between my thighs with a need I couldn’t explain, drew me over the edge of propriety and into the bed of a eunuch with a raging boner.

*Something I hadn’t thought was possible.*



He pulled his throbbing, veiny cock from his pants, stroking it before my hungry gaze as I kneeled next to him on the bedding. His free hand reached out to grab one of mine as he led it to his shaft, encouraging me to stroke it just as he had been doing a second ago.

My mind was on autopilot, and I followed his lead, letting my hand wrap around his thick, hot shaft and pump up and down, the need inside me building again.

“Roxani, men would bow and kiss the ground you walk on for the chance to have you in their sheets, and here you are, in the bed of the eunuch, my cock in your soft hands. I am beyond blessed to share this moment with you.”

I blushed profusely, but my hand never stopped its steady stroke, my grip tightening at the base to encourage his breathy moans. His eyes rolled back in his head as I moved to strip off my pants, my core dripping with my slick, wet nectar, my need almost unbearable as I laid on the furs beside him, inviting him to touch me. He pulled a breast free from my bandeau top, his lips closing around a pert nipple as he thrust his fingers inside me, mimicking the movement of my hand on his cock. I leaned into his touch, my throat constricting as he brought me close to the edge again before withdrawing from my tightness, replacing his fingers with his *very-much functioning manhood* that filled me nicely and had me moaning into the furs for hours.

He filled every one of my holes, over and over, until I felt as if I could take no more. He brought me to so many orgasms I had lost count, and then he did it all over again with his soft lips, my body begging for more, greedy and hungering for pleasure.

I was beginning to think the cooks occasionally slipped some aphrodisiac herbs and plants in the food, thus explaining the randiness which every woman and man around here seemed to possess, myself included.

When I left his rooms under cover of darkness, my swollen sex throbbing with a dull ache, I found my mind wandering to the king yet again. I worried for his return, yet here I was, rolling in the furs with women and men alike when I wouldn't open myself to him.

I decided then and there that would change the minute he came

back from his long campaign. It was long past time I accept his apology and move past our rocky start, and I knew if he came to me upon his return, I'd flop over like a fish on the shore and let him do to me whatever he desired.

I needed him to know I'd forgiven him, that I'd found myself falling for the headstrong, powerful king who dominated my waking and sleeping thoughts every second of my existence.

It was high time I felt what I'd been missing out on, and this time, *I wanted it.*

Perhaps more so than he did.

# Chapter 22

~Artaxerxes III~

This campaign had dragged out for three months now, and I was no closer to seeing it end. I'd sent over many offers of a peaceful takeover, but the stubborn generals had forgotten the first rule of warfare—know when you've been beaten. Although, now that I thought of it, that rule contradicted the first rule of Persian Military training—never accept defeat.

*I could not fault them for refusing to yield, but it was irritating.* I'd planned to be gone no longer than a month and be back with plenty of time to enjoy the summer heat. But no.

I was out here, on the battlefield, surrounded by sweaty, irritated men. Men who--like me--ached for the comfort of a woman.

Much like every other time my thoughts turned away from battle, my mind conjured up an image of the beautiful wife I'd left behind. I'd been loath to leave her after an attempt on our lives, and I was as of yet unable to track down who had attempted to kill me. Bagoas assured me he would see that the investigation continued in my absence; I did not expect to ever find the culprit.

Assassins rarely left a trail unless they wanted people to know. Like when I'd had my entire family put to death in front of the city walls, their blood running red against the pale sands beneath their knees. My own mother had considered killing me or leaving me to die in the desert when it became clear that I would not ascend to the throne before my brother. My brother's mothers were not much better, constantly scheming behind my father's back about putting their sons in the best position to become king. They abused me growing up, treated me like the dirt beneath their feet, and when I'd reached the age of twenty, they'd left me in the middle of the scorched desert to die, no water, no clothing, no food, no transportation.

When I crawled into the city twenty days later, somehow alive, it was declared I must be of a godly loin, and it was professed as a sign of my true destiny—to rule. I survived several poisonings, two fights to the death, and an ‘unfortunate accident’ orchestrated by my mother. And when my retribution came, once I’d clawed my way back to health, it was swift and merciful, slitting their throats on the hot sands to let them bleed to death. They were dead before they hit the ground, and their bodies fed the carrion for days after.

I left their bones there for an entire year as a warning to others who would challenge me.

*I would not be an easy target, and I was a deadly opponent to tangle with.*

I sighed heavily as I watched the caravan of enemy leaders approaching the camp, come to the ‘peace talks’ again. Probably no less stubborn this time, if the blatant coloring they wore was any indication. When one is planning to lose a battle strategically, one should not come dressed to the nines in easy-to-spot colors. You should blend in, so they cannot tell you from your men.

A voice called out to me from the bottom of the hill. “Your Highness, the caravan approaches.”

*As if I hadn’t been watching for it from this lookout tower.*

*For hours.*

*Always watching.*

I nodded a dismissal to my soldier, and he rushed off to rejoin the squad of men greeting the returning group. They were here yesterday and the day before, and I was tired of listening to their empty promises of peace. I was beginning to think they were stalling me, perhaps gathering forces from allies.

It was no matter to me. Anyone within the entire continent who had heard of my army and the Persian Empire wanted nothing to do with us. My reputation for being a ruthless murderer preceded me, and it worked in my favor.

*Usually.*

I had more important things to do while these boys played games in

a war camp.

My general called to me from the next outlook post, motioning for me to join them. I sighed heavily, my knees creaking as I rose from my crouched position, eyes always on the alert as I hiked the short distance to the waiting crowd of people.

*I would permit no surprises.*

Inside the tent, four generals, one of which I'd never seen before, all stood in a circle, arguing over the map I'd so graciously laid out the last time we'd met. They gesticulated wildly at the topography, two of the four insistent that they could take me if only they could convince their allies to the north to participate. *Rebellious streaks run deep in these factions. Perhaps I could use that to my advantage.*

During our peace talks, my eyes continuously strayed back to the youngest man in the room—a hot-headed young man with impressive muscles and a cocky attitude. His confidence was admirable, but his overabundance of it made him feel immortal, and I knew his ilk well. He could be a dangerous foe, but only if taken under the wing of a more senior, seasoned war veteran.

None of the other men in the room seemed willing or eager to side with him.

Deciding to move on to the next man, I studied the weathered creases on the face of the greying man. His face was marred by a long scar running from his brow to his upper lip, making him look fierce and dangerous, even in his older age. His hand rested lightly atop the hilt of a heavy sword, the handle sparse for one so decorated. It was an instrument of war for him, nothing else.

The next man had an air of superiority around him as if he felt those in the room next to him were beneath his consideration. He was older than me, but not by much, the wrinkles in the corner of his eyes just beginning to form. His abdomen had started going soft, and I could see that while this man had the potential to be cunning, he was not fast and didn't appear to be interested in actually going to war, so much as instigating the others into it.

*I'd bet he hadn't been in an actual battle in years.*

The fourth man in the room was younger than me but older than

the hothead, his stoic facial expressions giving nothing away as he sat, glowering at the others. Occasionally his sharp eyes would dart across the room to study me, as if he were trying to figure out what made me tick.

*It had not gone unnoticed.*

I raised my hands as the hothead and the older gentleman started shouting again at each other, trying for diplomacy. “Men, we are here to find a peaceful solution we can all live with. I’m sure you want to go home just as badly as I do. So why don’t we make this easy?”

Hothead stepped forward, palming the cold steel handle of his blade. I kept one eye on that blade and another on him. *One could never be too careful.* When he shouted at me, spittle flew from his lips and smacked me in the face, his veins pulsing in the side of his throat as he disrespected the man allowing him to live.

“You dare to tell us you’d like to hurry things along when you come here, an army in tow, and try to take us off our lands?”

I sighed as he glanced around, reading the room. “You misunderstand the terms of my peaceful surrender request. I do not want you to move from these lands, for then who would tend the crops? Mind the people?” I brought my hands together in front of me, lacing my fingers together as I stared at him over the bridge of my knuckles. “What I want is for you to disband your armies and go home. I want to ride home with the next light, so I can be balls-deep in my pretty women by nightfall. But what I want and what I get are two different things. Why don’t you ask me the more important question?”

The old man’s hand left his blade hilt, his eyes observing me. Hothead inched closer as I wiped the spit from my face. “You want us to roll over because you cannot take us all!”

I whipped out a hidden blade from my tunic, pressing the cold metal against his throat, the sharp edge drawing blood. Hothead’s breathing sped up, his palms clammy as he grabbed at the hand holding my knife. As he whimpered in fear, I leaned closer, towering over him as he struggled not to piss himself.

“You,” I growled, “have been a source of contention this whole time. If I take you out, the others will eventually fall into line and do as I demand. You are stubborn and do not yet know how the world works. So let me explain something to you.

“I am a vicious and cruel man, one who murdered his entire family and had their corpses laid on the sands before my palace walls to feed the unfortunate carrion who stalk our skies. I am a king, a god, immortal. No man has ever bested me, nor shall one ever do so. Your surrender is inevitable. Your life, however, can be forfeit with just a single flick of my wrist, if you would like. I could slit your throat and let you bleed out here on my tent floor, and then I’d bring your women here and force them to their knees as my men and I rutted them like whores among your blood.

“I could take your land, your property, your livelihood. I could ruin your entire countryside, set fire to all the structures I can find, and leave a path of destruction in my wake. But I am trying to be a patient ruler. I try to do better by allowing you the human decency of choosing your battles. You enter this one, you’ll go in knowing what I can do, but you won’t come back out. I promise that.”

I yanked my knife from his throat, wiping his blood on the middle-aged man’s tunic. He stared at me in horror, his eyes unmoving as my lips curled upward sadistically, my hand slipping my knife away once more.

The old man spoke first, his tone even, but his eyes tumultuous. “I believe, Rowan, it’s time you climb down from that high horse and negotiate with us. I have no intentions of dying today over a couple of acres of land and some cows.”

The young man huffed but sat back down, his hands still visibly shaking. He made no further protest as we began the actual peace talking.



My outburst had earned me two things—a renewed reputation for being a bloodthirsty animal, and an end to the peace talks. The opposing men all came to the agreement that they would allow themselves to be absorbed by Persia and her glory, falling under my protection. In return, they would award me half their crops this season and several new horses for my stables. They would also grant me their lives, should I ever call on them to join me in battle.

Each man left with a new trinket from my personal collection as a gesture of good faith. Our weapons were superior due to the method of smelting we'd mastered, and the hilt of every soldier's sword was ornate, complex, and decorated with jewels. The one named Rowan had started to balk a few times, but his elder stopped him with a warning look.

As the sun set, we packed everything that wasn't necessary for the night in the camp. Many of the men were eager to return home and be with their families, loved ones. I just wanted to get home and bury my face in Roxani's tiny pink pussy again, supping between her legs like a starving man at a feast. I loved the way she shuddered from the force of her orgasm, spread before me, vulnerable, eager.

Perhaps she would be willing and ready for more this time.

*I could only hope.*



\* \* \*

That night, as I lay my head on the rolled-up mat I'd fashioned into a pillow, my thoughts drifted once again to my lovely Roxani. But then they took a turn, wandering to the incident in the temple.

I'd heard her mention the name of a long-abandoned goddess when she woke. *I was certain of it.* But what had she seen that had brought that name to her lips? She had refused to talk about it when I pressed her after she'd woken up from a three-day slumber. My gut told me she was hiding something that she didn't want me to know.



But what was it? *And why was she hiding it?*

*What did it all mean?*

It irked me that these thoughts kept me up at night when I could be sleeping, hurrying along the morning sun. After tossing and turning for what seemed like hours, I got up, wandering outside the tent for a brief jog around the camp. I could run a patrol while I wore myself out; hopefully, it would drive away the thoughts plaguing my mind. As I began the slow-paced jog around the camp, I noticed a few other soldiers having a hard time sleeping. For some, like myself, the anticipation of a return home without bloodshed was a plus. I much preferred when our adversaries agreed to surrender—it meant my reputation preceded itself. It also meant I didn't have to go back to Persia to inform several families that their loved ones had perished in battle. When a man fell in my army, my chancellor arranged to take care of the widow and children, if it should be required. I never wanted my people to suffer, and those who were willing to go to war beside one such as myself—and die for my cause—were worthy of the highest honor. I would not let their sacrifices be in vain, nor would I allow their families to suffer in their absence. A man's salary as a soldier would be transferred to the widow until her children were grown or until she took another husband.

It was the least I could do.

Some call me a monster, an evil, conniving, sly fox willing to kill without hesitation or remorse, and maybe that was true. But also true and less-known outside of our empire was my generosity to those who devoted their lives to me. To Persia.

*I was not all bad.*

And when I returned to Persepolis, I would have to prove it. Not just to my people, but to a certain mahogany-haired beauty with piercing eyes and a passion that burned brighter than the sun.

Perhaps I could redeem myself in her eyes, and then that passion would burn for me.

My mind eased somewhat, and my feet began to tire as I neared my tent. With one more cursory glance around and a nod to the night

sentry, I made my way back into the canvas shelter, laying down to a much more restful sleep.

*Tomorrow was a new day, and I had much to do.*

# Chapter 23

~Roxanne~

*Another day with no word about the king. This was getting ridiculous.*

I had been worried for some time now, but now other wives began to wonder at his prolonged absence. I didn't understand my need to see him, but deep inside my soul, something had shifted in his absence. It was as if life in the palace had grown tiresome, repetitive, and stale, without Ochus here to ruffle my feathers and push my boundaries.

And then there was the matter of my 'destiny', so to speak. That strange man in my vision had called me a goddess. I knew so little about this place, the culture, the people, and their religion, that I seriously debated asking Ochus for help. Laying it all out there for him. Being 100% honest in an effort to get help.

But then I thought about the possibility that he wouldn't believe me, and that scared me even more. I worried that he would laugh me off the face of the planet and have me committed, or whatever their ancient world equivalent was. I ached to know what the hell exactly I was supposed to be doing, but the vague shadow-man hadn't expressed an interest in being clear or explanatory. I'd gone to the temple a few times in Ochus's absence, but even the temple priests were reluctant to talk to me about this Anahita person/god/thing.

*Why?*

I'd asked Bagoas one night, after a round or two of his exquisite attention, but he'd immediately clammed up, wiping my juices off his lips and leaving before he even sought his own pleasure.

The other wives had been the same, and Layla was in the same boat as me—ignorant of the religion. She still worshipped Athenian gods, and those would be of no help to me here.

It seemed I was on my own.

I'd managed to shake my guard in the marketplace today, ducking behind some stalls and sneaking out the back. Where I was going today, I would need to be inconspicuous and unguarded. No way would anyone show a royal wife where the dark market was held. If I wanted answers, I would have to search for them where everything else illegal happened. Perhaps there would be loose tongues among their ranks of merchants and slaves.

I stumbled across a dingy-looking man in the alley behind the seedier merchant stalls, and I pulled my face covering tighter around me, making sure it was securely fastened before I approached him.

"Excuse me, sir?"

He didn't even look up from the ground, where he spun a gold coin intently, watching it catch the light and shine. I tried again, reaching into my tiny, hidden purse for a single coin. When the shiny metal appeared, I watched his brows raise, but he remained motionless, obviously trying to play me for more.

"Hey, buddy—got a question for you. You help me out, this coin is yours."

That seemed to get his attention. His eyes listed towards me, his fingers flexing around the coin on the ground, yanking it up before depositing it in his pocket. I had a moment of hesitation, of doubt, as he stood, and at a much more imposing height than I'd initially thought him to be.

*Now I realized why Ochus had insisted on a guard.*

"What's a pretty woman like yourself doing in a back alley at the market?" His eyes were dead, empty pits as he stalked towards me, not bothering to hide his interest as those black orbs looked me over—twice.

I shivered in fear of this domineering, dangerous man before me, squaring my shoulders so as to not look perturbed by his fierce countenance. "I have questions nobody wants to answer, and I can't just let it go."

The strange man tilted his head, his eyes twinkling. “What *kind* of questions you need answers to?”

*It was now or never.* I took a deep breath, calming myself before I answered. “I need to know about Anahita.”

“*Religion? You’re looking for religion?*” He straightened at the name, glancing around to the ends of the alley as if I’d conjured an angry god by speaking it. “I can take you somewhere, might help you there.” He narrowed his eyes, focusing on the coin still dangling between my fingers. “But you’re gonna pay me.”

I tossed the coin to him, already forming a plan in my mind. “You’ll get another when we get there.”

His eyes widened, a smirk on his dirty, pale lips. “Oh, you’re smart, lady. I coulda just took this one and run. Now you make it worth my while.”

I nodded at his astute observation, already one step ahead. “Yep. You see to it that I’m not robbed on the way.”

The stranger inclined his head slightly, turning away from me. “Follow quietly,” he whispered, and then he took off.

I worked hard to stay on his heels, dodging through dimly lit alleys and tight walkways between houses and stalls. The whole place reeked of piss and over-ripe fruit, with just a hint of overcooked meats beneath it. But the further away from the regular market we got, the more smells it added. I recognized the familiar scent of blood and was glad when we’d finally moved past that particular scent cloud. I didn’t want to know where the smell had been coming from or why.

I just needed answers.

The strange man stopped in front of a tall building with absolutely no markings on it. The stone walls were bare, save for a hook here and there that had once served some purpose I would never understand. He knocked on the door three times, then stepped back, holding out his hand in my direction. I moved to drop the coin in his palm, my voice a whisper. “I’ll give you two more if you wait around and show me the way back when I’m done here. Say, dark?”

He nodded his head, casting a wary glance back and forth down the alley. "I'll be back at sundown, miss. Count on it."

The door before us opened, and a lone figure emerged, dressed in black robes. The voice was monotone and unisex, giving nothing away as to the identity of its owner.

"What have you come here for, child?"

The man nodded to me, slinking off into the shadows of the alley. Swallowing the anxiety threatening to claw its way up from my stomach, I stepped forward, pulling back my shawl. "I'm looking for answers. I need to know about Anahita."

The robed figure beckoned me inside, shutting the door quickly behind us. "Come with me."

I followed the hooded one down several dark hallways, the musty smell akin to a basement that hadn't been opened in years. I wondered how cloistered these people lived if everyone refused to talk about them except in secret. Who were they? And how would they be able to help me?

"You want to know about Anahita? She is our goddess, one the Persian King abandoned when it served his purposes. She is the goddess of fertility, healing, and wisdom. And we have been forced to worship her in secret since Artaxerxes III outlawed and abandoned her worship. It was decreed her power and worshippers were too great, that they strayed from the basis of Zoroastrianism by putting her higher than Ahura Mazda." The robed figure led me into a large worship room where several people were on their knees before a statue of a beautiful woman. "This is our Anahita, and we worship her in secret. What would you like to know about her?"

"Why did the king outlaw her worship?"

"He claimed his father had been too obsessed by the goddess and that it drove him to madness in his cultish worship of her. I will not claim his devotion was appropriate, but I am not the king's judge, so I could not pass judgment. However, most of her followers were regular worshippers, and now their whole lives are lived in secret for fear they would be put to death for their beliefs."

"I'm not a spiritual person, but I cannot believe anyone has a right

to tell another they can't believe in something."

The robed figure sighed, kneeling before the statue. "You are far wiser than the rulers of our empire. Unfortunately, not all have such knowledge."

I decided to put all my chips on the table. What could happen at this point? I was in a secret worship hall for a goddess who'd been made illegal. "So I went to the temple of Mithra awhile back, and during the ritual, I had this vision."

The hood on the robes fell back, revealing a petite woman next to me, her black hair tied up neatly at her neck. "You were given a vision by the gods? That is a very rare occurrence. But why could you not ask your questions about this vision while you were in the temple?"

"Well, there were some complications. And at first, I didn't want to believe it. But I think I met another god in the vision. He was a portly fellow with a thick beard and bare feet—"

"You met Mithra? He hasn't revealed himself to someone in a vision in over a hundred years! You are truly blessed by the gods!"

"He, uh, he told me some things I'm not exactly sure I can believe."

The woman stood, pulling me to my feet with her. "What did the wise one tell you?"

I swallowed the nervous lump in my throat, suddenly unsure of myself. "He told me I am Anahita reborn. That I must restore balance, that the king must accept me, or I'll never be able to return from where I came. I'm not from this time. Not even from this part of the planet."

The girl and several others now openly stared at me, their eyes wide and hands clasped before them. The woman who had led me here put her hands on my shoulders, staring into my eyes. "This is a serious claim you make. If you are found to be lying, you could be killed here today, and nobody would be the wiser."

"I-I swear I'm not lying."

"Aya, enough!" a voice called from the doorway. The deep baritone shook my guide out of her intense stare-down, and she stepped back

to bow as the man approached us. He stood much taller than those around him, with a thick torso and a broad chest. His intense gaze pierced me to my soul as he studied me, his lips curled down in a frown. "So you claim to be a reborn manifestation of our goddess, Anahita. You claim it is your task to bring the king back to the base of his religion and allow her followers to live in the light again. That you must sway him to revoke his ban on her teachings and worship."

I nodded, unsure if my voice would work if I tried to use it at that point.

"You must prove your identity to us."

I blinked, staring blatantly at the man as if he'd grown a third eye in the center of his forehead. "Come again?"

"You must prove your identity to—"

"Yeah, I got that part. But fucking *how*?"

His lips curled up into a malicious grin, and suddenly I didn't want to be anywhere near this man anymore. "You must step into the purifying fires of the shrine."

*Oh, HELL no. Abso-fucking-lutely not. No way in hell was I gonna step into any fires—*

"I'll do it."

*Bitch what? Now my own body had betrayed me, signing my death certificate in triplicate.* I wasn't about to walk through a fucking fire

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*You will, if you want to complete your task,* a voice inside my head whispered. *You have nothing to fear. Trust in me to protect you, and I shall provide.*

*What the hell,* I figured as I followed the man out of the room and down several other corridors. *Only one way to find out.*





I followed the man for what seemed like forever before he brought me to a set of stairs leading down. *So far down I couldn't see an end.* Despite the rising panic I felt pulsating just beneath the surface of my skin, I pressed onward, following the man as he took a metal torch from its bracket on the wall, lighting our way. The stairs went straight down, and the walls got closer and closer with every step I put behind me until it was almost uncomfortably claustrophobic. If I wanted to turn around and go back, I would have to go to the bottom first. There truly was no escaping this situation.

When we finally reached the end of the stairs, the closed-in hallway opened up into a room with a large pit in the center, which I could only guess was where they expected to start a fire and have me walk through it.

*Fucking fantastic. What have I gotten myself into this time?*

In the span of a few months, I'd gone from a quiet, unassuming college student on the cusp of graduation, to a concubine in a king's harem, to a wife of a king, traded in my jeans and loose-fitting tees for a swatch of silk and see-through fabrics that would be indecent in my time. I'd lost long-distance travel like cars, trains, and planes, and gotten camels, horses, and caravans in return. I had not one, not two, but three lovers—if you counted the king, which I did—and in my past life, I'd struggled to keep one long enough to form a relationship.

And now, there were voices in my head encouraging me to walk through a fire I knew would kill me under normal circumstances.

*Was this what it was like to lose your mind?*

I watched the man stoop beside the pit to light the coals that lay there, using the torch he'd commandeered at the top of the stairs. He then moved around the room, lighting other torches on the wall as he slowly illuminated the room we stood in. Finally, when he came full-circle back to where he'd left me, he reached out to yank on a rope that disappeared into the ceiling above us. *Who knew how far up it went?*

Shortly after that rope stopped swaying, people began filing into the

room from the staircase we'd just descended. Everyone wore the same, nondescript robes of black and grey, some with their hoods up, others without. All of their eyes held confusion as they peered around the room, visibly confused by the beckoning. Until the man beside me spoke up, his hand still firmly wrapped around the handle of the original torch.

"My brothers and sisters, it is indeed a momentous occasion today. We have been sent one who claims to be possessed by the spirit of our goddess, Anahita. Therefore, I have called you all together here to witness a verification ceremony."

Immediately, voices rang out around the room, some shouting, others just a dull murmur that echoed off the cave-like walls.

"How do we know she speaks the truth?"

"She's a spy!"

"Who is she?"

"Why now, of all times?"

"I'm missing dinner for this?"

"Silence!" the man bellowed, effectively killing the dissent. I had the sneaking suspicion that he was their leader, although nobody had made any indication of such. It was clear to me in the way they deferred to him and listened without question. The way he had led me down here, without any introduction or explanation. And it was evident in the way he carried himself, as if this was a job he'd been made for.

*I just hoped I was doing the right thing.*

"Now, this woman claims she is the reborn spirit of Anahita, our divine goddess. She has agreed to perform the ritual to prove her claims, and only after the successful completion will her assertions be validated."

An agreeing rumble rang out among the crowd; no more shouts of dissent were forthcoming. I chanced a glance over at the pit, which was roaring even higher with every second I observed it. The man held up his hands for complete silence, and the crowd complied, watching him intently. He turned to me with a frown on his face.

“You must remove the trappings of this plane, for they would certainly burn away in the flames. On the off chance that you are lying, and you do not survive the ritual, your belongings will be returned to your family, if you would like.”

I swallowed the bile that rose in my throat, fighting back a wave of sheer panic and self-doubt. *There's no going back at this point. I really hope you know what you're doing, strange voice lady in my head.* I got no response, so I stripped off the dress I was wearing, laying it in the man's arms as I struggled against the urge to hide from view. “Yeah, that would be nice. If I die here, return those dresses to the king.”

A collective gasp escaped some of those in the crowd, but the leader's face was impassive as he studied me, his eyes only holding curiosity, unlike the usual visitors in the harem, whose eyes were full of lust and greed. “I shall see to it. But if you are telling the truth, you will have nothing to worry about.” He nodded his head at two women, who stepped away from the crowd and offered me their hands. I assumed I was to take them, so I put my hands in theirs, letting them lead me to the end of the fire pit, where the flames were the lowest.

I let my gaze take in everything one last time, glancing around to memorize my surroundings. *If I go out now, at least I go out trying.*

*You will not go out anywhere. Trust yourself and me.*

There was that voice again. I didn't respond to it, my eyes drawn to the highest point of the flames. They would barely lick my waist at their peak, which was a blessing and a curse, I guess. If I was going to burn up, it would be a slow process, and only half of my body would be affected.

*If I catch fire here, I'm just gonna lay down and die. No joke.*

The women held my hands, urging me to step forward onto the hot coals, the fire tall enough to cover my feet. And still, my mind wouldn't let me move.

Until suddenly, I couldn't control my movements anymore. It was like a separate force was piloting my body as I watched in horror, my feet finding purchase on the hot coals—first one step, then

another, entirely within the confines of the flames. Before I could remember I was supposed to be in agony, burning alive, I found myself standing in the center of the pit, gasps ringing out around me. My arms stretched out on either side of my body as the women let go of their hold on me, backing away in horror—or disbelief, I wasn't sure which.

And then a voice that was not my own erupted from my throat as the flames shot higher, engulfing me.

“Is this not proof enough that I am who I claim to be? This woman is my vessel, and her spirit is my own. To deny me any longer would be to deny your faith. Look upon me and know your truth. I am Anahita, and I am your god.”

Every robed figure in the room fell to their knees around me as the flames died down, supplicating themselves at my feet as I moved out of the pit, standing naked before them. *Okay, this is some weird-ass shit, but thanks for not letting me burn alive, I guess.*

*You are welcome, my dear,* the voice echoed inside my head, where only I could hear it.

The leader of the followers of Anahita stepped forward, offering me—her—my clothing back. I felt my fine motor control return before I was ready to take it back, limbs heavy as I pulled the clothing I'd arrived in back on my frame. The two women from earlier rushed to help me tie things off I could not easily reach myself, bustling around as if I were someone important.

*I guess no matter which way you cut it, I was, sort of.*

And now, I'd get my answers. Hopefully.

# Chapter 24

~Artaxerxes III~

The city was on the horizon. I could practically smell the market, with its mixed wares from fruit and baked goods to the newly tanned leathers that many of my men would inevitably be checking out later that day. I knew it was just the mental part of me that longed to be home conjuring this image, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

*We were almost home.*

I spurred my horse onward, leading the men in a charge over the next mountainside as the tall pillars of the Apadana became more than just a silhouette on the sunset-orange sky. The eagerness among my men was palpable, making the air thick enough to slice with a scimitar. The horses' tails flicked wildly against their hindquarters as their impatience grew. These beasts knew where we were. They also knew what awaited them in the stables at home—a good brushing and some tasty oats. They were eager to return to their quarters as well. My stallion tossed his glorious blonde mane haughtily, as if he expected to be welcomed back with his own parade, and the sheer absurdity of it made me erupt with unrestrained laughter.

Soon enough, the men closest to me were laughing too, mimicking his head toss with their own, before prancing around in formation. Usually, I would not put up with such a blatant display of insubordination, but my spirits were consistently higher on returning home from campaign, and the soldiers knew it. So they took liberties they wouldn't otherwise dare. And I allowed it.

*Sometimes, we must humble ourselves as equals to instill great loyalty in our subjects.*

When we finally crested the last hill before the city gates, I heard the familiar horns echo across the valley, signaling our return

home. Of course, everyone in the metropolis knew those horns, and I expected a full welcome when I returned.

I was eager to see Roxani. I hoped our time away had softened her toward my advances, and I had a wonderful gift for her in the carts that transported the supplies that hadn't been consumed.

*Would she be happy to see me return?*



\* \* \*

Inside the walls of my city, I was accosted by subjects wishing us congratulations for the victory, moving through the throng of people to find their men amongst the ranks. Most of the horses were led away by servants, but I held fast to my own, waiting for the man who always took care of my horse. I only trusted him to maintain my favorite stallion, and the man had never missed a horn call before.

I started a slow walk to the stables with the horse in tow, wondering if maybe he was sick. Surely that would be the only reason for not answering the call of returning soldiers. However, a glance around the paddock produced no sign of him there, either. I was reluctant to hand the horse off to another servant, so I held his reins tightly, leading him to his stall. As I walked down the lane between the occupied stalls, servants and soldiers alike stopped to stare at me. While it wasn't entirely new for me to be in the stable myself, it was a rare occasion, and it had never happened after a campaign.

*I felt like a foreigner in my stables.*

After brushing the stallion down, storing his gear, and feeding him, I made my way to the gathering of servants at the opening of the paddock, my frustration building. *I am a king. I shouldn't have to tend to my own horse.* The minute that thought crossed my mind, I recognized it for the selfish and entitled point of view that it was. Was I really any more important than the soldiers who laid their

lives on the line for me? Was I truly above tending my animals?

*When had I become so conceited?*

"Have any of you seen the man who tends my stallion normally?"

The servants stared blankly at me, cowed from my open inquiry directly to them. I didn't often speak outright to the servants down here, so their confusion was warranted and understandable. Finally, one smaller boy spoke up, his voice belying his youth.

"He is at worship, sir. He may not have heard the horn."

"How could one not hear the horn? Even at the temples, the horn echoes loudly and well enough to have been here by now." I mulled over this as two other servants discreetly elbowed their young cohort. *It made no sense.*

I nodded at the servant crowd, turning on my heel to march to the palace. First, I needed a bath, and I needed a woman. After that, I needed Roxani. I had gifts for her, and I was eager to see how she'd fared in my absence.



\* \* \*

*Roxani was nowhere to be found.* She wasn't in the Queen's Residence, nor was she cavorting with the other women in the gathering verandah. I took the short trip to the treasury, retrieving her gifts to present to her, but her room was empty, and the guards hadn't seen her all day.

*None of them.* Not even the guards she'd had assigned to her. I practically strangled the men in the guard station before one man finally shuffled forward, reeking of sweat and anxious energy.

Apparently, they'd lost her in the market earlier that day.

*Great. Just wonderful.* My new bride lost in the market, or worse. It wouldn't be hard to surmise she may have been kidnapped for the black market. It wouldn't be the first time a seedier merchant lured

a pretty woman to the auctions and then sold her against her will. My men had been working to curtail it, but you could only fight the enemy you could see, and this was one I could not. These men worked in the shadows, and there was no finding them.

I hoped that fate had not befallen my Roxani, though I doubted she'd have gone without a fight.

Perusing the market on foot, dressed down and still dirty from my trip, I fit right in with the other people milling about the market. I spotted a few reprobates in the alley behind the leather vendors and called out to them, hoping they wouldn't split.

Which, of course, they did as soon as I approached them. All except for one.

The filthy man spun a gold coin on the ground, twirling it between his fingers carefully as he tried to act unaffected by my presence. "You looking for something? Or just scaring off my dice victims for the night?"

"That depends. You see a woman around here on her own earlier in the day? I'm worried she's been taken to the black market."

His eyes widened for a fraction of a second, almost imperceptible if you weren't watching when it happened. *He knew something.*

"No, sir, can't say I've seen a woman recently. You her husband or something? I could ask around."

I leaned down until I was face to face with the grimy man, his eyes like dead pits, empty and hollow. "I think you're lying. No, I *know* you're lying to me. And I want to know why."

A sheen of sweat formed on his brow, knowing he'd been ousted. "I can't tell you where she is, but I can tell you where she went."

"Oh really? Do tell."

"She asked me to take her to the temple."

"*Lies!*" I shouted, slamming my fist into the wall beside him. "She wouldn't have dodged her guard to go to the temples! Now I suggest you put that coin back in your pocket and show me where you took her. And fast."



The urchin swallowed thickly, his brows furrowed as he eyed my scimitar apprehensively. *I forgot that was hanging from my hip, but I guess it has its purpose after all.* "Alright, but I don't want no trouble, man. I'll go get her and bring her to you if you wait here—"

"You will lead me to where you took her, and I will not wait for you to run off and leave me here."

He frowned but stood, not bothering to look back at me as he plodded slowly down several dark alleys and between other vendor stalls, staying just out of sight as he moved. A slower man wouldn't have been able to keep up with him, but I had no trouble. Suddenly, he ducked into an alley, and when I rounded the corner, he was gone, nowhere in sight. I raced to the end of the passage but couldn't find him there, either.

"Damn you!" I shouted at the sky, angrily slamming my fist into the stone wall of a nearby building. Too late, I realized my mistake as I felt my knuckles cracking from the force of my swing as they met the unforgiving stone. "Of *course*, I would injure myself. What *else* can today throw in my path?"

I stood there for a few minutes, stomping in anger as I cradled my now-broken hand, the shattered bones in my knuckles aching as I gritted my teeth, debating my choices. If I waited here, he would be able to find me again, and I would soon find out if he were good for his word or not. Or, I could head over to see the healers and get this hand tended to.

Just then, I heard rustling at the end of the alley adjacent to me, and I glanced up, the pain in my hand forgotten.

Standing there not twenty steps from me was Roxani, her hair flowing wildly around her face, unkempt and tangled but still beautiful. She wore a dark cloak over her clothing, her hand clutching tightly to a headscarf, her eyes boring into mine as neither of us moved. The man stood next to her, a frown on his face as he glared at me, his distaste evident in those empty eyes. I watched him nudge Roxani in the side, and she produced two gold coins from her purse, handing them over to him. He wasted no time in disappearing down the alley they'd emerged from, leaving us there, surrounded by merchant stalls, but essentially alone.

"Roxani," I whispered, unable to make my feet move to close the distance between us. She, however, had no such hangups, her feet flying as she ran full-tilt towards me, a smile on her face, relief flashing across her face just moments before she slammed her body against mine, her arms wrapping around my neck in a tight embrace. When her face tilted up to mine, she reminded me of a sunflower seeking the sun, and before I could stop myself, I leaned down, covering her lips with my own.

Our kiss was passionate and hungry, full of all the mixed emotions between us that manifested in the unbridled heat in that one act. My body wanted nothing more than to pick her up and slam her against this wall beside us, taking her right her in full view of the merchants and their customers. Thankfully, I still had my wits about me, so I broke the kiss off reluctantly, my good arm wrapped around her as if she might disappear if I released my hold.

Her lips were still parted as she stared into my eyes, a blush creeping up her throat as she took in my disheveled appearance. "You're back," she whispered, as if she couldn't truly believe it herself. "I've been worried, but nobody would listen to me. I felt stupid."

"My dear Roxani, you are *many things*, but stupid is *not* one of them." I reached up to caress her face, realizing a second too late that I'd lifted my broken hand to make the motion. I swore under my breath as my broken fingers brushed against the tender skin of her cheek, and her eyes went from astonished to worried in a fraction of a second.

"You're hurt! Why didn't you say so? We should get you taken care of right away. That looks broken."

Her hands stretched out to cradle my injured one gently, her fingers brushing lightly over the lumpy and slightly bloodied knuckles as I sucked in a breath, the pain more intense than I had anticipated. "It's nothing, just a scratch."

She narrowed her eyes dangerously, wrapping her headscarf around that mane of chestnut hair before taking my good hand and leading me away, back toward the palace. "You are going to get that hand taken care of if I have to drag you there myself."

I had no doubt she would do just that, so I didn't fight her, letting this wild vixen lead me to the healers as if she were the royalty and I just a simple manservant, subject to her every whim. When she'd seen to my hand being treated and bandaged, I let her lead me to her room, my gifts for her safely tucked away in the back of the pouch slung over my shoulder. She didn't stop when Bagoas and Layla called out to her from the other side of the courtyard, offering a wave as she dragged me along, her pace hurried, the sound of her feet echoing against the marble floors of the residence.

When we were finally safely behind the doors of her room, only then did she allow herself to slow down, offering me a chair beside the fireplace. I took it willingly, realizing it was best not to argue at this moment. She seemed to have something to say, something on her mind, and I would let her have this moment.

*Oh, how I had missed this woman.*

# Chapter 25

~Roxanne~

*I must be out of my mind.*

I had missed the horn signaling his return and just barely managed to avoid being caught somewhere I had no business being. I had slipped the street man an extra coin for helping me out of that situation, putting his hide on the line to save mine from what he thought was a jealous husband.

*Well, technically, he wasn't wrong.*

I'd been so happy to see Ochus, so *relieved* that he had been mostly unharmed, though I suspected his hand had nothing to do with the campaign he'd returned from. And now that I'd managed to get him in my room, I was suddenly overcome with second thoughts.

*Was I really ready to do this?*

The king sat atop my pathetic chair beside the empty fireplace, covered in a layer of grime and dust from the return trip home, his hair slowly coming loose from its tie at his neck. Yet, despite all that, the man reeked of animal magnetism. I felt my body's reaction to him, and where there used to be fear and apprehension, now was a nervous eagerness, a desire to be in those strong arms of his, safe and cared for. I wanted those hands all over me; simultaneously, I worried I wasn't truly ready and didn't care to come off as a tease.

*The last thing I needed was to lead him on only to change my mind mid-coitus.*

His eyes watched me as I paced around the room, not noticing the note that slipped from the folds of my cloak as I yanked it off, tossing the heavy fabric over my clothing chests, my headscarf joining it seconds later. But the king didn't miss the paper that had slid to the floor, and he reached down to pick it up a second before I could do it myself, turning it over in his hand as he studied the

image stamped on the outside of the page.

His eyes darkened as they settled on the image of the goddess on the page, and I realized I'd made a grave error in not being more careful with that correspondence.

I watched the king stand abruptly, stalking over to me like a panther hunting its prey. I froze, suddenly unsure of the outcome of my life as I knew it. I learned to be associated with that image meant death in this place, and yet I'd recklessly brought that back here with me.

"What is this?" he growled, waving the paper in front of me as if it were a poisonous cobra. For all intents and purposes, it might as well be. I recoiled as if it would fly from his fist and poison me, careful to word my response carefully.

*Could I trust him with the truth?*

He didn't give me a chance to find out before he tore it in half, gritting his teeth as if it took all of his strength not to strangle me where I stood.

"You may be new here, but in case they didn't tell you when they gave you that paper, there are a few things that may get you put to death in my kingdom. Worshipping that goddess is one of them. I will not have a wife of mine kneeling before the goddess that turned my father from a reasonable man into a heretic."

I nodded slowly, trying not to meet his eyes. I opened my mouth to agree with him, but what came out instead shocked both of us, though I wouldn't have been able to tell you who was more amazed at my outburst.

"Who gives you the right to tell people to abandon one of their gods because one man perverted her image for his own purposes?"

His eyes went wide, those lips I'd imagined on my body just this morning suddenly turning down in a nasty scowl. "I am the king, and I *am* a god, Roxani. I decreed it when I put that traitorous wretch to death, and I will not change that. My kingdom has been peaceful in her absence, and I will not even permit her *name* to be spoken in these lands."

“But I—“

“There is no discussion on this, Roxani. Find a different god to worship. This one is dead.”

He stormed out of the room, slamming my large doors behind him with a resounding and very final *bang*. The effect was not lost on me as I collapsed to the floor, tears falling from my eyes.

He hadn’t killed me for my transgression, but he might as well have with the way I felt.

He had rejected my very being and spoken down to the goddess within me, rejecting her assertions and turning his back on me when I was at my most vulnerable.

*What was I going to do? How could I tell him now?*

I realized with a sudden, sickening clarity that I was well and truly alone here.

*The thought was like a stake driving straight through my heart.*



\* \* \*

The king didn’t come back that night. I saw him in the gardens after most had retired to their quarters for the evening, hunched over one of the concubines as she made exaggerated moans loud enough to wake the dead. I tried to roll my eyes at the whole thing, but it was a challenging endeavor, considering it was supposed to have been *me* in her place tonight.

*Oh, how the turns have tabled.*

He’d looked over his shoulder at me, somehow *knowing* I was there, in my window, watching. And he’d kept eye contact as he rutted her, breaking me with each thrust. Every time her cries of pleasure echoed off the lower walls, I felt another tear fall, mingling with the fabric of my skirt as I forced myself to stay there, the painful reminder that I wasn’t supposed to be here etched into my mind. I

realized I'd fallen for a man who took from me what he wanted, when he wanted, and left me wanting when I came to him freely. This wasn't my world or culture, and I was foolish to believe that would ever change.

*I was stuck in a nightmare.*

The mystical voice in my head was also ironically absent, choosing when it felt like appearing to offer me wisdom or guidance. "How the fuck can a god be so irritating, eh? Is this your game? Isolate me and turn me into a pariah to serve your purpose?"

*Silence. Go figure.*

I forced myself to stand once the king and his partner left the gardens, no doubt seeking more private quarters for constant companionship well into the night. The sweet smell of heaviness before the rain wafted in through the window, and I found myself moving to the wall where I kept my chests. My feet moved of their own accord, but once I had opened one, my body was my own, the goddess possessing it giving no other guidance.

"What now, lady? You got me here, so I assume I need to change?" When she didn't respond, I began lifting outfit after outfit from the chest, not stopping until I reached the bottom and my eyes nearly popped out of my head.

At the very bottom sat a pair of jeans, a white and red button-up flannel shirt, and a pair of hiking boots. The clothes from my time sat there, mocking me from their home at the bottom of this chest. They hadn't been here a few days ago when I'd emptied this trunk in search of a headscarf. They hadn't been here when I arrived. There was no explanation for how they'd ended up in my wardrobe, clean, pressed, and folded neatly as if waiting for me to find them.

*These are my clothes. Were my clothes. What the hell?*

I pulled the familiar clothing on, realizing I'd become accustomed to the feeling of light, airy dresses, and soft fabrics. My skin itched beneath the shirt fabric, the jeans chafing the inside of my thighs as they rubbed uncomfortably together. The feeling of denim should have been a wonderfully comforting experience, but instead, I found myself longing for the harem pants as I slid the shirt over my

shoulders, sliding my arms through the prickly cotton sleeves. As I pulled on the boots, lacing them tightly, I realized there was no room to wiggle my toes. They felt confined, and so did I, dressed in the trappings of my own time.

*How ironic that I would come to hate something from my old life so much in such a short time.*

My body jerked towards the door, stopping only to grab the coin purse on the table and the headscarf on the hook before wandering out into the night. My guard gave no indication that he even saw me leave my room, and I frowned, thinking he'd fallen asleep on the job.

*He cannot see us. I have hypnotized his mind. He will not even know he has lost time.*

Well, that answered *that*.

I watched as Anahita piloted my body, getting used to how to make her—my—movements look more natural as she neared the main street outside the Queen's Compound. We headed off in the direction of the stables, and suddenly I knew what she had planned for me. For *us*.

"We're running, aren't we? Do these clothes mean you're sending me home?"

*No answer.*

"Hello, goddess-lady-thing? Any information would be nice."

*Mount your horse and ride.*

Well, that was something, at least. "Ride where?"

She didn't bother to respond, which wasn't surprising at this point. I managed to locate my horse in one of the stalls by the king's elegant stallion, their coats like yin and yang: ebony and ivory. I saddled mine up, determined to put distance between myself and this place. Maybe if I got far enough away, I could put all this behind me—the pain, the sadness, the fear, the loneliness.

I was grateful for the absence of the usual night guard at the stables, but I knew that probably had more to do with the same



affliction that had befallen the guard than any natural luck on my behalf. My stallion could sense the incoming storm, and he tossed his head fitfully as I mounted him, leading him out of the safety of his barn. He complied with my signals, but did so reticently, making it obvious what I was doing, in his equine opinion, was dangerous and not approved.

*Still, when one is commanded by a fucking goddess, it's not wise to disobey. Not that I could have, since she can control my body.*

When the horse had finally settled somewhat, I urged him off at a trot, heading for the walls of the city. I didn't know what was out there, and I'd never been good at geography, so I was going off on a lark into the darkness of the night with a brewing storm at my back and another closing in at my front.

Reaching the stone road outside the city, I breathed a sigh of relief, wondering if I was really about to escape without so much as a single person noticing my absence. Not usually one to take unnecessary risks, I spurred the horse to a gallop, taking off into the night, leaving all the trappings of this time behind me as the lightning raced across the distant sky, foreshadowing what was to come.

*The storm was far from over. In fact, it was just beginning . . .*

# Chapter 26

~Artaxerxes III~

*I'd royally screwed this one up. And now Roxani was gone.*

Our area hardly ever saw this heavy rain for this long, and with Roxani—and her horse—both missing, I was concerned for her safety, should it flood. And with the way the water poured from the heavens, it wouldn't be long now before the water became more than the land could hold.

I'd come back to her quarters last night, hoping to coerce her into telling me where she'd gotten such a letter. Perhaps she didn't understand the seriousness of her actions. And it was getting harder to remain angry at her. When I'd found her room empty and her guard unresponsive, my mind had gone into a tailspin, the heavy rain threatening on the horizon like an ill omen.

The first search had proved fruitless, turning up no sign of her anywhere inside the walls. If she were hiding out with a friend she'd made recently, I'd have found her. My men had searched every house overnight and turned up nothing. This morning, I instructed a group of my men to look for her outside the walls, but their perimeter check produced nothing. I didn't want to send them any further without accompanying them, but I also knew if Roxani didn't want to be found, I would need more than some bumbling guards to help locate her.

*Had she run off because of me?*

I'd visited the temple in the night, begging Ahura Mazda and Mithras to guide me, help me bring her home, but I was only met with silence. The gods were either punishing me or angry with me. I could hardly blame them, either. I'd been nothing short of an animal after I left Roxani's room. I knew she was sitting in her window when I drug the concubine out into the gardens. I'd watched her, watching me as I took out my frustrations and anger

on the other woman. She didn't look away, nor did she give me the satisfaction of leaving her sentry position as I forced myself to fuck the dazed and half-asleep woman in front of me. I'd thought the act would anger Roxani, make her respond to me. Perhaps it would serve as a punishment for getting involved with the wrong people.

But when I walked away from that garden, I felt filthy, as if I'd debased myself instead of her. My heart ached at the betrayal she must have felt, and I'd instantly gone in search of her to ask her forgiveness for my ignorant rebellion.

*Yet, she wasn't there.*

She was nowhere. The guard in front of her room insisted she'd never left it, and I couldn't fathom her jumping from the tall window. And since a person couldn't exactly up and disappear, I was beginning to suspect the guard had fallen asleep on his post, missing her departure.

*I would deal with him later. Now, I had more pressing matters to attend to.*

It had been raining steadily for quite a while, and I knew the valley would flood if it didn't let up soon. A group of runners had dispatched to spread word to the smaller villages and towns near the waterways to flee to higher ground. First, farmers would set loose their livestock, giving it a chance to survive, and later, when the waters had receded, they would go in search of the animals. I always ensured they had abundant assistance with manpower to round up their livelihood after the floods damaged everything in its path.

I glanced out the window of my war room for the hundredth time since finding her gone. I hadn't slept. Hadn't stopped to eat. Even Bagoas was worried about me, insisting Roxani would turn up. But she didn't. He didn't know what I'd said to her before she disappeared. Didn't know she was involved with the forbidden followers. *She could become an unwitting sacrifice for the heretics.*

Like I had almost been.

A knock sounded at the door, setting me on edge. *Could it be news about Roxani?*

“Enter,” I shouted, my mind racing. A guard led in a man wearing tattered black robes, and I recognized my stable servant. He shuffled slowly to stand before me, the guard offering no explanation. When they stood across the table from me, I frowned, my brows drawing together in confusion.

“Sir, this man says he has information for you regarding your missing wife, but he won’t tell us what.”

I met the servant’s cold gaze. “Is this true?”

His lips turned up in a smirk, his entire face transforming in a split second from the unassuming servant to a dangerous pit viper. His words were spat like venom, and I fought to recoil from the heavy aura that had settled around him. “I won’t talk in front of your guards. As much as I don’t want to tell you anything, I fear her life may be in danger if I don’t.”

I motioned for the guard to leave us, remaining silent until it was just the two of us in the room. “Speak your mind, servant. And while you’re at it, perhaps you can tell me why you missed the horn call yesterday.”

“I was at a religious ceremony. I missed the horn because I did not hear it.”

I moved to sit in my ornate chair across the room, motioning for him to join me. He declined a seat, choosing to stand instead. Sighing, I inclined my head, waiting for him to continue.

“Your lovely wife was also at this religious ceremony.”

*That* got my attention. “A religious ceremony? Would this by any chance have been a ceremony that could result in banishment or death for any of the attendees?”

He nodded slowly, his eyes narrowed. “Fortunately, your wife does not share your barbaric reaction towards a religion you do not understand. Your father was a bad man, and he twisted the teachings to meet his needs. He was not a true follower, and yet you punished those who meant you no harm, simply for the transgressions of a man who we had already denounced.”

I held up my hand, waiting until the man had grown silent before

speaking. “You come here and out yourself as a follower of Anahita, knowing it could mean certain death for you, and then you tell me my wife attended. You do not tell me which wife, or why, and I fail to see how these things are connected—“

“She’s missing, isn’t she? The wife that attended the ceremony is missing, and you need to find her. There will be floods soon.”

I froze, wondering how he knew all this. “Go on.”

“You knew she was at our gathering. Or if you didn’t know, you suspected. And for whatever reason, she fled from you for your repulsion.”

My eyes narrowed as the anger rose within me, fighting to get out. I beat it down, wanting the man to continue. I knew there must be something more, something he was taking his time in getting to, but I couldn’t let my impatience get the better of me.

“Nobody saw her leave because she didn’t want them to. She left because you rejected her for her attendance to our faith, but in doing so, you’ve rejected who she is.”

“Who she is? She’s an Athenian woman.”

“She is Anahita reborn. Our ceremony proved it. She walked into the fires of immortality, and they did not burn her. She rose them higher around herself, and still, they did not injure her flesh. She is the goddess, and she fled because you showed her she couldn’t trust you with that information.”

The man stared smugly at me as I struggled to process this information. It all seemed to be too convenient. *How could I possibly believe these assertions?* But they made a sick sort of sense. The gods were constantly testing us, and how better to test me than to send me the very thing I rejected?

*But what could I do about that now, since Roxani was missing?*

“Go after her. I bet her trail is still out there somewhere. It was raining after she left; her horse would have sunk in the ground, leaving more lasting impressions.”

“How the fuck did you know what I—“

His knowing smirk unnerved me somewhat. “I have my ways. But you don’t have much time. She is ill-equipped to deal with this world. She is not from this time.”

His words made no sense, but I needed to act fast if there was any truth to anything he said. “Ready my horse, servant. I will meet you at the stables.”

“Where do you plan to go?”

My mind was reeling with the possibilities, all the roads she could have taken. I realized I had no idea where to start. But I did know one thing.

“I have a goddess to find.”



\* \* \*

~Roxanne~

My horse had sloughed through the mud and muck, the torrential downpour of rain, and the cold winds, but even I had to pull off the main road and take cover for the night. Finding a large cave that showed no signs of inhabitation by animal or man, I coaxed the horse inside and managed to build a small fire before the worst of the chill set in. I peeled my clothes off to dry and sat next to the fire, naked and alone, the sounds of the howling winds and hammering rain echoing just beyond the mouth of my temporary shelter.

When the first rivulet of rain started pouring through the cave, I knew it was time to go. We couldn’t afford to be trapped in a cave as the water rose around our ankles, so I begrudgingly pulled on the still-wet clothes and mounted up, muttering an apology to my stallion as I led him from the cave, back into the cold rain beyond.

We covered ground for what felt like a lifetime, coming to rest under a small tree on a hill. The nearby river had swollen beyond

its banks, and I didn't know these lands well enough to avoid it. I needed to backtrack, but I needed sleep, and my body was beginning to crash without it. The tree offered little shelter, but the broad leaves kept a bit more water off me than I had expected, and so I had tied the horse to the tree, using the colossal palm fronds as a roof as I grabbed a few minutes of shut-eye.



\* \* \*

When I awoke some time later, the rain had gotten worse, and I immediately realized my mistake. Water penned me in on one side, and if we walked out into the swift current, my horse and I would be swept downstream with the quickly-moving flow. Unfortunately, there was no other option, but maybe if we struggled, we could make it to the other side of the flow, albeit further downstream than I had hoped.

“Well, boy, what do you think? Sit here and wait to die, or brave the waters?”

The horse tossed his beautiful black mane, showing me he had no fear of whatever I would lead him into. But a tiny voice in the back of my head told me to wait. Just a little bit longer.

It wasn't the goddess, though. She was absent, as I had come to expect during the times I actually needed her help. With the exception of the flames in the ritual, which served her own purpose, she hadn't offered to help me with any of her magical powers, and if it weren't for her, we wouldn't be out here in this mess. We'd be back in Persepolis, snug tight in the furs, beside a crackling fire—

My head snapped up as I heard what sounded like shouting coming from just out of range of hearing, the faint echo bouncing off the rock face as I struggled to make it out. *Could they help me if I could get them to hear me?*

“Help me!” I shouted, over and over into the empty void. There was no answer, and the shouting grew fainter with every second. *If I'm*

*going to get out of here, I have to do something drastic.* Mounting my horse, I wrapped the reins tightly around my hands, making sure if my grip failed, the leads would not. I urged the stallion towards the water, watching him balk for a second before lifting his head in anticipation of the swim. I backed him up, planning to head for the water at a full tilt. The further out he could leap into the water, the closer we would be to the other side, and the less space we would have to cross to get back out.

Slamming my heels into his haunches, I yelled out as loud as I could, hoping to not only scare the horse into moving but in case whoever had been shouting earlier was still close enough to hear me. The bottom of my stomach fell out as the stallion launched himself into the air, sailing over the water for just a second or two that somehow seemed to stretch out into minutes, hours, days. I clenched on the reins tightly as the horse's hooves broke the water, bracing for the jarring impact. The second his massive torso hit the water, we were jerked sideways, the force of the water propelling us downstream before we'd had a chance to react. I heeled the horse's flanks again, thankful for his immediate responsiveness as I felt his legs moving beneath us.

*But it wouldn't be enough.* I realized too late the horse wouldn't be able to fight the current alone, dread washing over me as I wrapped my arms around his neck. He fought against the flow—failing miserably, just barely managing to keep us afloat. I prayed that whatever gods brought me here would just make it fast before the water took me, and I steeled myself against my impending, unavoidable doom.



# Chapter 27

~Artaxerxes III~

There it was again. It was a faint echo, but someone was clearly shouting from over the ridge. I could hear the thundering sound of rushing floodwaters as I spurred my stallion on, heading straight up the hill. My clothes stuck to me like a second layer of skin, but I had long ago ceased to care. The rain had hammered down on me, but I wasn't to be deterred, driven by a need to find Roxani.

When I crested the hill, the sight in the valley below sent a wave of panic through me. My horse reared back in fear as the waters before us rampaged through the valley, carving its own path between the rocks. Just upstream from my position, I could see someone on horseback, struggling in the floodwaters. I leaped into action, encouraging my horse into the shallows in an attempt to anchor him to grab the other rider when they passed by us.

*I missed the uprooted tree swirling in the rapids, and it cost me my stability.*

The heavy log slammed into the side of my horse as I jerked sideways, barely managing to hold on as the waters took us prisoner. My head swiveled around just in time to see the other horse and rider slam into our side, propelled by the muddy waters. When the rider looked up into my eyes, I could hardly believe my luck—both good and bad.

“Roxani!” I shouted, my brain freezing as I realized she was okay—or as okay as one could be when you were stuck in the raging floodwaters determined to kill you. She stared blankly back at me, her eyes as round as saucers as I reached over to grab the reins of her horse.

If I could just get both horses to swim together, we could get to the bank and get out of here.

*Everything else could wait.*

“Get your horse moving towards the shore!” I shouted over the roaring rapids, slamming my heels into the side of my mount. He tossed his head in indignation but reacted to the command, his feet flailing wildly as he inched towards the shore. Roxani took the hint, her horse moving with mine as if his life depended on it.

*It sort of did.*

Roxani stared straight ahead as we moved slowly towards the edge of the water, a frantic gasp leaving her when her horse’s hooves stumbled in the shallows. But with his body against my horse’s body, the stumble didn’t cost him his progress, and he quickly regained his footing, dragging his massive frame out of the wild waters.

When we were safely out of the rapids, I leaped down from my horse, rushing to the side of the black stallion as Roxani slid from his tall back, her body slumped. She felt heavy in my arms as I reached out to catch her, suddenly worried for her health.

*How long had she been out here in this rain? She could catch a fever, die!* I needed to get her inside of a shelter--and fast--so she could dry off. Thankfully, there was a sentry outpost nearby, which would have been abandoned as the waters rose. I carefully unwrapped the reins from around her wrists, marveling at the intricate knots she’d tied in the leather to keep herself attached to her horse. When she was finally free, I looped his leads around my horse’s head, mounting my beast behind Roxani’s slumped form. I wrapped a rope around her and I, securing her to my torso before I spurred my horse on, heading for the outpost.

*I just hope I’m not too late.*



\* \* \*

The outpost was more of a cave than anything else, but the men

who did sentry duty here had stocked it in preparation of the winter, and there were clothes, furs, food, dried meats, and plenty of wood for fires. Best of all, the interior was dry, so the only thing that would need to dry was our clothes. I couldn't help but admire the way her clothes clung to her frame as I pulled her from the horse, carrying her inside the cave. But these clothes were different. I'd never seen garments like these, and I'd conquered many civilized empires. The fabric was one I'd never seen before, and it felt like super soft, thin leather. The top covering her upper body was soft but heavy with rainwater, and she'd tied it up to make it easier to move around, I guess. When I managed to figure out the fastenings on the front of the tunic, it made a sickening *splat* as it fell to the floor, creating a puddle around itself on the stone ground.

And her footwear was the bulkiest, thickest thing I'd ever seen. There was a slightly malleable section of material on the bottom that I imagined must cushion her feet as she walked, but then it felt like an untreated animal hide all the way up and around. The whole situation left me speechless and more confused than when I'd started. Now, she lay naked beside the fire, her skin warming as the fire raged on in the pit. I fed it sticks occasionally, having added my own clothes to the drying pile as I watched her.

When she finally stirred atop the heavy furs I'd fashioned into a bed, my body reacted of its own accord, moving to her side to make sure she was okay.

She sat up and stretched out, not realizing she was naked, or that she was in the presence of anyone else. When her eyes finally moved around and settled on me, they widened in shock, seconds before her skin flushed from the chest up, making her look absolutely delicious. I felt my cock twitch in appreciation, a fact which her eyes *also* did not miss.

I didn't miss the look of appreciation and awe she shot at my groin.

"Roxani?" I coaxed, eager to hear her speak. To make sure I wasn't just dreaming all this. "How do you feel?"

She opened her mouth to respond, dissolving into a coughing fit as she struggled around the hoarseness of her throat. She tried again, her voice steadier this time. "I'll live, I guess." She glanced back

down to my growing cock, sending a jolt of pleasure down my spine when she didn't immediately look away. "Why are you out here? And why are you naked?" She glanced down at herself, flushing as she scrambled to cover herself. "Why am *I* naked?"

I chuckled at her frantic response, remembering our oral pleasures atop the table in her room with fondness. My cock swelled once more, bobbing eagerly between my legs in response to the erotic imagery. "Well, do you remember getting swept away in the flood?" She nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving mine. "And you remember me leaping in after you?" Another nod, this one more hesitant than the first. "When you got out of the water, you passed out. We were soaked, and it gets cold at night here. So I had to take you out of those wet clothes and get you dry and warm." I glanced over at the strange garments hanging from a ledge as the water dripped from the end of the fabric, landing on the floor with a faint *plop*. "Speaking of your clothes, where in the world did you get such strange garments?"

I watched her eyes trail over to her clothes, wide and fearful. Her voice was barely a whisper. "I don't need your help. I'm trying to get home."

My boisterous laugh echoed off the stone walls of the cave. "If you're trying to get home, you're heading in the wrong direction. Athens is the opposite way out of town."

Her brows drew together as her whole face turned down in a frown. I heard the frustration in her heavy sigh as she looked outside the cave, the steady rain a dull roar. "No, Athens isn't my home. And you wouldn't understand."

I leaned forward, falling on my knees as I turned her face to stare into her eyes. I saw the frustration and anger warring there, swimming around just below the surface with another look I hadn't expected to see on her face.

*Sadness.*

"I can try."

She shuffled sideways as I moved to sit next to her on the furs, positioning my legs so she wouldn't think my intentions were

sexual. *She needed someone to listen. And I would do that for her.*

“You don’t want to hear what I have to say. It’s not like you’d believe me if I told you.”

She glared at the fire, her gaze turning wistful as the flames flickered, reflecting an orange glow around the cave. The light it emitted danced across her face, masking her in shadows only to reveal her seconds later in stunning clarity. Her profile was breathtaking, and a fleeting jolt of pain struck me right in the heart.

*How had I lived without this stunning creature for so long?*

She took a deep breath, leaning forward, her hands fisted at her sides. She didn’t look at me as she spoke, but her words were clear, and they held the weight of a secret she’d been carrying for a while now, all by herself.

“I’m not from this time period. Those clothes are from the future. Wayyyyy in the future. Think so far in the future that it’s unfathomable—two thousand years in the future, plus about another four hundred. I fell asleep in my home and woke up in the back of a cart. I get held hostage, sold for profit, and kidnapped. And then I get raped. To top it all off, I find out I’m possessed by some fucking goddess who your people aren’t allowed to follow, I had to walk through fire I *know* should have burned me alive, and I get through all of that just to be rejected, and later, broken.”

I fought for composure as I tried to process what she had just said. Literally *anything* from that whole outburst would be preferable to the jumble my brain was in right now. “Why don’t we try this again? Can you start again, this time with the whole part about not being from here?”

Roxani sighed, finally turning towards me. Her eyes were no longer hard or angry. Now, they were just . . .

*Defeated.*

“I am from the future. I fell asleep many months ago, and when I awoke, I was no longer in my own time. I was in yours, over 2500 years in the past. I kind of went with it because all of our movies and shit on time travel say never to disturb the timeline—“

“Wait, what are *movies*?”

She shook her head at me. “Like plays? Public performances. Stuff like that. Anyway, our, erm, philosophers, uh, told us never to get involved with historical figures of importance in these plays, and, well, not to be blunt about it, but you *are* like a whole ass king and all that jazz, so . . . “

I frowned, following her, but just barely. “So you stumbled into a situation that you thought was bad, and you couldn’t work your way out of it because . . . ?”

“Who would have believed a concubine in a caravan if she’d started insisting she was kidnapped from another time period and she’d traveled from the future?”

She paused a moment for that insinuation to set in. When it finally did, it was *my* turn to blush. “You have a point.”

“So I did what I had to in order to survive. But when you . . .” Her breath hitched in her throat, and I realized she was trying not to cry. “On our marriage night, I told you no, and you—“

“I was an ass. And I hurt you when all you were trying to do was what you thought was right.” I watched the tears fall from her eyes, all her pain sinking in and haunting me once more as my eyes were opened with sickening clarity. I saw the results of my hasty actions, and now the guilt I had carried with me increased tenfold. *I had destroyed her. And still, she gave me an audience. Trusted me with this secret.*

Roxani choked back her tears, not giving me a reprieve from the pain she laid on my doorstep. *Pain I had caused.* “Yes. You broke something in me that night, but I still hoped it was worth it. I thought if I just rejected your advances, I wouldn’t alter the timeline, and history would go on like it was supposed to. And that maybe someday I would get to go home. But then we went to that ritual in the temple, and I had a vision.”

“What did you see?”

She glanced back at the fire, her gaze wistful, like she didn’t want to believe any of the words coming from her own mouth. “I saw a man, orange clothes, bare feet, big beard. The Followers of Anahita

insisted he must have been a manifestation of Mithra. He claimed to have been hunting for me for over two thousand years. That I had an important job. And that until I completed it, I couldn't go home."

"Is your time so wonderful that you would leave all of this to go back to it?" The words rushed out, and I was powerless to stop them. I knew they marked me as a weak man, but I couldn't bring myself to care. *If I lost her, I lost myself.*

Her eyes were empty as she stared back at the flames, her body rigid. "Back then, it's all I wanted." Her eyes darted to the side, glancing at me from the corner of her eye. "Now, I'm not so sure. My life wasn't the best back then, but it was mine. Here, I have nothing and everything at the same time. It feels like I'm betraying my future, my parents, my family, by enjoying this and choosing to stay. And as imperfect as my life was, I miss it."

More tears crept from her eyes, and I felt powerless to help her as she sat there, staring into the fire, silent tears streaming down her face. Her pain was one I could never understand, and I wished I could take it away for her. "You never said what this task was you had to complete."

Her shoulders sagged in defeat. "I had to convince you to believe in Anahita again. And I guess Mithra figured that wouldn't be hard to do since I was the reincarnation of her spirit. But how was I supposed to feel when you assumed I was just a follower and rejected me, just when I'd begun to forgive you? Or when you mocked me later in the gardens, fucking the concubine while you watched me? A piece of me shattered as I stood there and watched you intentionally hurt me. Punishing me for being something out of my own control. You *destroyed* me, and then suddenly my old clothes were in a chest I know they hadn't been in before. She paralyzed the guards and hid us from view until we were out of the city. And by the time I woke up mentally and realized I was in trouble, it was too late. My emotions had clouded me long enough for the floods to happen, and I was exhausted. I've been wandering around out here in the desert, watching these waters rise, trying not to drown or pass out for a whole day now, maybe longer. I have no idea what she wanted me to come out here for, but she's been an unhelpful bitch ever since, and frankly, I'm glad she's not talking to me cause I've got some choice words for her."

I couldn't hold back the chuckle that erupted from my chest at her outrage and anger in the end. "You should never yell at the gods. Aren't you afraid she'll smite you?"

Her huff of indignation only served to fuel my laughter as I collapsed backward on the furs.

"Smite me? What the hell could she do that's worse than what she's already done?"

I stopped laughing at that, realizing she had a point. "So you're supposed to convince me to bring back the worship of Anahita, and once you've succeeded in that, she'll let you go back home, to your own time?"

Roxani nodded solemnly, her features suddenly serious. "I'll get a choice—stay here or return home."

"Do you think you would ever choose to stay? Is there a future where that's your choice?"

Her shoulders lifted in a shrug, falling back down as if the weight of the world rested on them. "I have no clue. As far as I know, everything I ever knew is gone or never existed. There's no way for me to know what effects my actions in this world will have on the future."

"You said you must convince me of the goddess's existence. How do you plan to do this?"

I rolled onto my side as she flopped down next to me on the bedding, breath rushing from her lungs. "Ugh. I don't have the slightest idea where to even start. I had to walk through fire to convince the followers. I'd imagine you're gonna be a harder nut to crack."

"What if I told you I believed you?" I bit my lip, waiting for her reaction. Her eyes met mine, and time seemed to stop for us at that moment.

"I'd tell you not to lie to me. You've already broken my heart twice. Let's not shoot for three."

She laid her head against the soft pelts, closing her eyes slowly. I inched forward until I was nose to nose with her, reaching out to



grab her hands. When her eyes shot open, I sucked in a deep breath, taking the plunge into this unknown. “I can’t go back and change what I’ve done to hurt you in the past. I can only make up for it from now until the day you leave me. And I can start by believing you. Your words have been raw, your admissions hard and painful, and yet you laid them at my feet, knowing that is where they belong. I will shoulder these pains for you because I have caused them. I can start to make amends for the horrible things I’ve done to you by taking your words as honesty. It’s not much, but it’s a start, and it’s all I have, right now.”

Her eyes studied mine for what felt like forever before she moved against me, turning into me as she nuzzled her way into the crook of my arm. “I’ve been so alone, Arty. I have no one—“

I yanked her tighter against my ribs, my arm nearly strangling her with the intensity of my embrace. “You have me, Roxani. And you always will. I will prove it to you over and over until my last breath.” Her eyes drifted closed again, exhaustion taking over her body. I loosened my hold, enjoying the way her soft, muscled body fit perfectly against my hard, calloused one as she drifted into a deep sleep.

# Chapter 28

~Roxani~

The king and I camped out for two days in the cave, neither of us eager to break the fragile truce we'd made while we were both cold, scared, and trapped. Now that the waters had receded, we would head back to Persepolis, and who knew what would come after that.

Right now, Ochus led the way, his footing sure as we walked the horses for a moment. I had gotten so twisted up in the landscape in the dark that I'd managed to lose my bearings. Thankfully, he knew where we were and where we needed to go.

I hadn't planned to come back with him, and I hadn't planned to tell him any of that stuff, but it had all just poured from me, at my most vulnerable moment, like a spigot I couldn't shut off. The information and snide remarks just kept flowing, and when I'd finally told him everything, it felt like a huge weight had lifted from my shoulders. It was freeing, and I took a deep breath every chance I got, finally realizing how constricted I'd become in my own shadow of secrecy. It had turned into a noose, and with every breath I took, it grew tighter around my neck.

Now? I could finally sing again. I felt light.

*All thanks to him.*

Sure, he wasn't the perfect man, but I'd dated far worse in my time, and there, they had no excuse for the way they were. This was ancient Persia. I expected a different culture when one traveled nearly 3000 years into the past. And since it was apparently fate, destiny, whatever, that brought me here, perhaps it didn't matter what I did. I was supposed to be here, doing *something*.

*Why not let that something be the king?*



\* \* \*

When we finally made it back to the metropolis, a mass of guards—and Bagoas—met us at the gates of the city, escorting us back to the palace. The healer checked us over as we walked, and I noticed the follower who had tested me leading away the king's horse as we were pulled towards shelter and a bath.

*Gods, I could use a bath.*

Ochus had given me his cloak to wrap up in when we arrived outside the city, insisting I hide the clothing from questioning eyes until we could get safely behind closed doors. He barked at Layla to bring some clothes for me to his quarters in the main palace, and then we were off, practically running to keep up with Bagoas in the lead. He caught Ochus up on the things that had happened in his absence and inquired as to my health at least twice before finally leaving us alone at the king's doorstep. We moved down the ornate halls on autopilot, the king calling out to a manservant to have a basin of water brought up to his room. When we finally closed the doors on the stragglers, my clothes laid neatly out on the bedding, and a basin of water on the table beyond, I finally let my guard down, dropping the cloak with a meaningful *thud*.

"That was too much to deal with so soon. I just want a good meal, a hot bath, and a warm fire in the fireplace to fall asleep with." I glanced around the room, realizing Ochus had instructed multiple outfits be brought to me here. *Enough to last me a while. Did he—?*

"You can stay here if you would like; no demands will be placed on you. You can sleep in my furs, relax, whatever pleases you. Or you can go back to your rooms. The choice is yours."

*It was as if he could read my mind.* "You mean that?"

"Anything you want. Just name it, and it will be yours."

I stared at a spot on the wall just beyond his head, weighing my options carefully. *I wanted things I was afraid to ask for.* Finally, after

what felt like an eternity, I managed to work up the nerve to put my thoughts and desires into words. *Don't chicken out; it's now or never.*

"I'd like to wash up, start a fire, and get beneath these furs with you before I lose what little nerve I have left."

His eyebrows nearly shot off his face at my brazen declaration, but he wisely said nothing, his smirk growing as he made his way over to the fireplace. "I should start a fire if you're going to wash up. Take the chill out of the air."

I nodded at his back, blushing when I realized he couldn't see me. I slowly unbuttoned my shirt as I faced him, wondering if he would turn around before I managed to tear the thing off. My body suddenly burned with a passion I didn't understand, nor did I want to. The fabric of my shirt brushed against my taut nipples, forcing me to bite back a moan as my body betrayed me with its eagerness.

*I'd waited for this opportunity for so long.*

I bit my lower lip as I squirmed out of the boots I'd been wearing, my jeans quickly joining them on the floor. Ochus faced the fire, his embers glowing as he blew on them to catch the tinder. I stood there patiently, waiting for him to finish so he could turn around and see me, naked and willing.

When he was finally satisfied with the flames that now worked to warm the room, he stood, dusting off his hands as he spun to face me. His smile froze on his face as he took me in, standing there as naked as the day I was born, my hair tossed over my shoulder as I stood tall. I held my arms at my sides, fighting the urge to conceal myself.

Ochus slowly stalked towards me, his eyes burning with the intensity of his desire as he stared down at me. I felt the lust rolling off of him in waves as his hands reached up to grasp my shoulders, spinning me around as he propelled me toward the table where the water basin sat. When I turned around, his gaze harbored no menace, but the authoritative tone and rough growl in his throat had me quickly resembling the floodwaters that had nearly killed us between *my legs*.

“Sit.” He pointed to the tabletop, and I eagerly complied, my legs dangling off the edge of the table as he stepped toward me. His hands settled on my knees and separated them with a quick jerk, baring my core to his eyes.

I blushed as the smell of my arousal permeated the room, Ochus inhaling deeply as if the very scent of it drove him wild. “Do you want this, Roxani?” he whispered, his nose pressed against mine as he bent over to meet my eyes. “I will not take what you do not freely give me.”

*If there was a way to my heart, that phrase did it.* Standing there, between my spread legs, his control holding on by a thread, he still stopped to ask my permission. *He had changed.*

“I want this,” I whispered back, not trusting my voice to say more without cracking. “I give it freely.”

He stared at me, studying my face for the lie. A guttural growl escaped his throat when he found none, his mouth covering mine with a force that surprised and frightened me. Our lips parted, his tongue seeking entrance; I gave him the access he desired, moving in a dance I could only pray he would repeat on my nether regions. His hands roamed over my back, trailing lightly down my spine before coming back up and sliding around to cup my breasts. He broke off the kiss to move his mouth over one pert nipple, swirling the sensitive bud with his tongue as I tilted my head back, my mewling of appreciation unrestrained and raw. When his hand reached past me to grab a wet cloth from the basin, I realized he planned to torture me by hand washing me himself.

*Suddenly, that bath sounded so much more entertaining.*

“Spread your legs and move your arms. Let me clean you up, kitten.”

I obliged eagerly, my good behavior rewarded as he paid particular attention to my lower half, making sure to linger on the tender folds, his finger gliding over my clit with frustrating inconsistency.

Every time I moved or whined, he moved his hands away. I learned quickly to hold still as he carefully trailed that washcloth over every inch of my body, *twice*. When he finally set the damn thing back

down in the basin, I thought my torture was over, but Ochus had other plans.

He led me over to the window on the far wall, taking another cloth and patting my body dry by the fire as I gazed out at the stars in the sky. His hands roamed over my body, taking their sweet time in the places he knew would frustrate me the most. If I had to bite my lip one more time, I would draw blood.

When he'd finished drying me off to his satisfaction, his hands disappeared, leaving me cold and alone, standing naked beside the fire. I turned to see him stripping down at the basin, lifting the cloth to wash himself down quickly. I opened my mouth to protest the missed opportunity, but his stern glance had me clamping my mouth shut firmly as I waited for him to finish. He didn't linger on his own skin like he had mine, choosing instead to rub at the dirt from our travels roughly, eager to be done with the task.

*I hoped he was eager to get back to me because I was dangerously close to going up in flames standing next to this fire here.*

Sure enough, his hands were soon back on me as he bent over, lifting my body with an ease that felt inhuman. I wrapped my legs around his waist, holding on to his neck for dear life as he moved towards the furs, depositing me gently on the bed. I lay there, legs falling open as if I was an ancient tomb and he was Indiana Jones, with the magic word to part the doors of my inner sanctum. His lips curled into a sexy smile as he took me in, his hands grazing gently over my legs.

“If you want me to stop, you have only to say the word, and I will. But tonight, you are mine, and I intend to show you just how badly I've wanted you willing and spread beneath me, your slick cunt dripping for me.”

*He might not have a way with words, but he sure could talk his way into getting me wetter than a water puddle.*

I arched my back eagerly as his hands roamed over my flat stomach, inching lower with every pass they made over my abs. I ached to have his hands on me, writhing beneath them as he tortured me with the briefest of kisses against my skin, or barely a touch here and there. I was fast growing frustrated.

When his hand ran over my abs once more, not swinging any lower than before, I fisted his hair in my hand, pulling him to his back on the furs as I straddled him, my breasts bouncing as I rocked my hips against his groin. His guttural moans only served to drive me on faster, and I felt his manhood rising to stiff attention between my slick thighs. I coated him with the sticky fluids seeping from inside me, lifting my ass to position myself just above his eager shaft. Those calloused hands grasped my ass firmly as I sucked in a deep breath, impaling myself on him with a quickness.

I froze atop him as a groan escaped his throat, the sound sending shockwaves through my core. "Fuck, Roxani, if you wanted it fast, all you had to do was say so."

I leaned over him, my core tightening around him deliciously as the angle shifted slightly. "I am an impatient woman, and I've wanted this for a long time. I like to be in control. So why don't you just sit back and enjoy the ride?"

And then I rose and fell on his cock, impaling myself over and over as the force of my fucking tore breathy moans from his lips. His hips thrust up to meet me with an equal eagerness as his fingers found my clit, swirling around it just right as we climbed towards an orgasm together. Before I could fall over the edge, Ochus was flipping us, putting me on my hands and knees as he shoved my head into the furs, his hands around my hips while he rammed himself into me over and over again.

His cock shifted and rubbed delectably against my g-spot as he pounded me hard. My cries of ecstasy and pleasure echoed off the rafters as I came, my inner walls milking him for his seed as he lost control, pulsing inside me as he spent himself. When his cock finally slid from my throbbing entrance, I moaned low, already feeling the absence of him acutely.

*When he was buried inside me, it felt as if I'd found completion.*

"That was amazing, Roxani." He flopped down on the furs beside me, his hands reaching out to pull me closer. I snuggled into the crook of his arm, feeling like I finally had everything I needed.

"Better than I imagined," I whispered, feeling his cock already stirring against my backside. "You want more *already*?"

His low chuckle sent a ripple of desire through me. "I'd love to show you a few more tricks, now that you've got that initial need out of the way."

As if to demonstrate his assertion, he sat up, pulling me atop his lap. "Go over there and bend over the table. Put your hands on the tabletop and wait for me."

His tone left no room for argument, so I did as he ordered, feeling all sorts of naughty as every dirty dream I'd ever had about this man came true right here, in his room. As my hands pressed against the top of the table, I felt his fingers slide down between my legs, teasing me with a little flick of the wrist as he moved to lift my leg sideways. I struggled to balance as he rearranged me silently, putting my foot up on the chair beside the table. I was spread wide, my aching folds still dripping from the royal seed that leaked out of my hole. I whimpered as his cock prodded at my tender folds, seeking entrance.

"Tell me how badly you want this, Roxani."

His lips were against my earlobe as he whispered my dirtiest fantasies into existence. His hand moved to steady my leg as he slid into me with one slow thrust, pulling back out almost to the tip before repeating himself.

"How bad do you want this?"

I leaned my head back, moaning as he stroked me inside with his cock again, my walls tighter in this position as I clenched around him. His second hand caressed a pebbled nipple, drawing moans from my body as I tried not to squirm against his manhood, the sensation almost like torture as he slid back into me once more, his restraint almost admirable as he tortured me.

"Your walls clench around me, begging me for more, but I need to hear it. Tell me what you want from me, woman," he growled against my neck, his teeth nipping gently at the tender skin. I shivered with anticipation as I opened my mouth, rocking back against him slightly as I moaned the words he wanted to hear.

"Take me, Ochus. Give me my release. Put that thing deep inside me until I feel it against my walls, and punish me until I can't take



it anymore.”

His fist tangled in my hair as he tilted me backward over his shoulder, lifting me from the ground and spreading my legs, his hands hooked beneath both my knees. I was spread wide, his cock pounding into me as his hips pumped against me, his cock spreading me wider with each thrust. I couldn't move, whimpers of pleasure escaping my lips as he rocked my world, my hands snaking down to tease my slit as he punished my core. I felt his balls tighten up against my ass as he roared behind me, slamming into me with renewed force, filling me with his hot load. Still he fucked me, moving to lean me over the furs, my legs dangling over the side of the bedding as he pounded into me from behind, his finger teasing at my virgin asshole as he plunged into me with his cock. I felt him pull out long enough to slide his finger inside me, coating it with his juices before replacing his dick once more.

“You're so wet for me, Roxani. Your walls clench around my cock deliciously when I bury myself in you.” When he thrust into me again, he gently pushed that finger of his into my ass, timing the thrust with his cock so perfectly it was like a tandem swimming team. His thrusting finger pressed against the sinful side of my arousal as he fucked both my holes, and I couldn't resist reaching down to play with my clit as he rocked my world from behind.

“Ohhh, *fuck, yes!*” My guttural moans mingled with his as he rammed into me over and over, his thick cock stretching me deliciously. Before I came on his stiff manhood, he pulled away, shoving me to my knees before him.

“Take me in your mouth and don't waste it,” he growled, his eyes burning me alive with their intensity.

I eagerly took his cock in my mouth, tasting myself on his stiff manhood as I slid it back my throat, working over the veiny ridges with my tongue. He grabbed the back of my head, more than eager to fuck my mouth as I swallowed him whole, his balls clenching as I sucked his load straight from the source, not a drop escaping my lips.

When I licked the musky flavor from the corner of my mouth, he dragged me back up to stand, crushing his lips against mine as if to

taste himself on my tongue. I let him, feeling his fingers enter me as his tongue tangled with mine, the stroking above and below the waist enough to undo me. I shattered atop his fingers, my legs turning to Jell-O as the force of my orgasm rocked me.

Ochus's hands reached down to support me as I shuddered in his embrace, my body worked to its limits and then some. When I felt my skin settle against the soft furs of his bedding, I settled in, seeking his body heat as he nestled up against me, his cock still stiff against the swell of my ass. I moaned deliciously as I thought about taking him again.

As if he could read my mind, he lifted one of my legs, entering me easily from behind, his thrusts less urgent and more tender this time. He brought me to orgasm more times than I could count as I laid there in those furs, shaking from the intensity of my pleasure. Every time I thought he would offer me a reprieve, he entered me again, proving just how easily he could turn me into a puddle in his bed.

That night, I thanked the gods above that Kama Sutra had come from these lands, or thereabout, providing this sexy beast of a man with the sexual skill of a fucking trapeze artist.

"All mine," I whispered as he finally let me sleep against his chest, my body so limp I couldn't find the energy to lift my head. "*My Arty.*"

# Epilogue

~Roxanne~

I'd been here for several years, managing to avoid getting pregnant by some fucking miracle. But when Ochus had left for his last campaign, I hadn't told him we'd managed to conceive this time, and now the thought weighed heavily on my soul as I anticipated his return. *Would he be angry? Surely he wouldn't miss the pronounced baby bump on my stomach. I was fit to burst any day now.*

I hadn't been able to bring myself to write it in a letter, of which I'd sent at least five. This felt like an *in-person* kind of talk, and he'd been gone for six months now. When he left, I had only missed one period, but when I missed the second one shortly after he'd left, I realized what had happened. Then the morning sickness had set in, dragging me through the dirt quite literally.

Ochus's caravan had sent a runner ahead, letting us know to expect them today. I felt a sharp kick from inside my stomach as a rolling cramp settled into my spine. I went white as I recognized that feeling from the description Enid had given when she birthed her baby boy last summer.

*I was going into labor. Shit.*

*"Layla!"* I shouted, fear gripping me. *I can't do this alone. I need Ochus.*

Layla burst into my room through the connecting door, fear and nervous energy at war in her body. "Is it time?" she asked breathlessly, her eyes darting to my stomach.

I nodded, suddenly feeling like I was two feet small. "I can't do this alone. He doesn't know. Layla, I need him!"

She got me to my feet slowly, encouraging me to inch toward the door. We'd set up a makeshift birthing suite in the next room over in anticipation of the baby's arrival. Just as we made it to the doors,

I heard the horn sound across the metropolis. Layla settled me in the bed smack in the center of the room, her face pale. "I'll get the healer and head for the stables. I'll tell him it's urgent."

I nodded as another contraction wracked my body, sending a sharp pain down my back. "Hurry," I ground out through my gritted teeth, and she disappeared out the door, her feet flying.

She returned a few minutes later, the king and a healer in tow. Ochus's eyes went wide at the sight of me, laying there among these furs, struggling to breathe properly. He fell to his knees beside me as the healer pulled back my skirt, gently pressing against my lady bits as another contraction gripped me like a vice.

"Roxani, why didn't you tell me you were with child?"

Ochus stared down at me, voice cracking as I gripped his hand tightly, letting a contraction pass through my body once more.

"I didn't know how. 'Surprise, you're a daddy.' Again."

He chuckled as I rolled my eyes, sucking in a sharp breath as another contraction rolled through me. I felt the pressure shift and knew it was time. The healer met my eyes, nodding as she encouraged me to push.

"Aaargh!" I cried as I hunkered down, pushing with everything in me over and over until finally, the tiny wails of a child echoed out around the room. Ochus turned to admire our baby, smiling when the healer held the child up for us to see.

"It is a girl, sir."

Ochus cradled her tenderly as the healer moved to snip her cord, and I felt like a weight had lifted from my shoulders, the air around me getting lighter as I leaned back, happy that she was healthy.

Ochus held her close as he turned to me, a smile on his face. "What shall we name her?"

"*Parysatis*," I muttered, remembering that name from one of my history textbooks. "She will be a great woman . . ."

I heard Ochus's voice shouting my name as I drifted off to sleep, the blackness claiming me as I bled out, another casualty of death

during childbirth in the old world.



\* \* \*

I woke up to the sound of thunder overhead, echoing around the building and shaking the walls as I realized I hadn't shut the window. I flapped the soaked papers around, trying to shake the water from their surface as I reached out to close the window. Suddenly, the lights went out, and I glanced out the window, realizing the whole city had gone dark.

*Great, a blackout. Just what I needed.*

I reached out to find the candle I'd had burning earlier on my desk, but it was nowhere to be found, and then it all came back to me in a rush. I'd burned myself earlier on the wax, and the candle was probably on the floor or in the sink in the bathroom, now useless. Frowning at my lack of memory, I felt my way along the wall, heading for the kitchen. There were more windows in there, and perhaps the lightning outside would illuminate the room enough for me to find another candle. I jumped as the lightning shot across the sky at the same time that a booming thunder echoed out, rattling my bones to the core as I fumbled in my junk drawer for a tea light candle.

*Anything would be better than darkness.*

A sudden knock at my door had me jumping out of my shoes again, and I glanced down to check my state of dress before making my way over to answer the summons. When I yanked on the handle, the heavy metal swung open to reveal a tall, rakishly handsome man standing in my doorway, his black hair soaked and hanging over his shoulders in soft ringlets as he stared at me, eyes wide.

*"Can I help you?" Something about this man was familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it.*

The man smiled, his charming grin disarming me. "I got locked out,

and I can't find my spare key. Now I'm soaked. Figured I'd see if you would mind me coming inside until the landlord brings over an extra key? I promise I'm not some deranged criminal stalker."

"Sounds like the exact thing a stalker *would* say," I muttered, letting the door swing wide as I fumbled my way to the cabinet where I stored my towels. "But you look worse than a wet cat, so I'll take pity on you. Come on in; I'll grab you a towel."

By the time I'd rounded up a towel, the stranger had made himself comfortable in one of my kitchen chairs, his jacket and hair dripping rainwater onto the tile floor. He grinned sheepishly at me as I tossed him the towel, drying off his hair first, then cleaning up the mess on the floor. He carefully stepped out of his boots, watching me.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," I muttered, extending my hand to shake his. "I'm Roxanne, grad student, and resident nerd."

The strange man extended his arm, his hand curling around mine possessively. "Call me Arty," he whispered, his eyes boring into mine as the memories from a few thousand years ago came rushing back to me. It was as if his touch had been the key to unlock the door they had been buried behind.

"Arty, huh? What a peculiar name," I muttered, wondering if he had felt the instant connection like I had.

His smoldering gaze confirmed my sneaking suspicions. "Well, as someone special once told me, 'That which we call a rose, by any other name, would smell as sweet.' A woman I loved a lifetime ago gave it to me. I have worn it like a badge of honor ever since, waiting for the day I could be reunited with her in a future life."

I blinked back tears, realizing I'd been given a gift far greater than I could have ever expected. "*Parysatis?*"

He smiled wide as he pulled my body against his, the feeling like coming home all over again. "She became a great woman. Just like her mother, Roxani."

I melted into his embrace, finally holding everything I'd ever wanted in life, my dreams firmly in my grasp. "I never wanted to leave you, love," I whispered.

He shifted to bring his forehead against mine, staring into my eyes as the tears finally started to fall. “I know,” he crooned, petting the top of my head lovingly. “I vowed to the gods I would find you again, and they helped me make that proclamation come true.” His hands snaked around my waist to rest against the swell of my ass, appreciating the short shorts I’d tossed on for my late-night study session. “Now we can be together forever, my sweet little songbird.”

“Forever is a long time for a love that transcends time itself.”

He pulled me up into his arms, carrying me toward the bed in the corner of the studio apartment while the storm raged on outside. “It is. And I plan to start spending it worshipping my own personal goddess, right now.”

“Forever,” I whispered, “isn’t long enough . . .”



\* \* \*

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# About the Author

Remy Cavilich is a West Virginia native with a colorful and diverse upbringing who has dreamed of bringing relatable and transforming stories to life for readers. Writing across multiple genres, she brings readers the narratives that keep them wanting more.

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